ANC

FALL 25c

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

ONE BY ONE THEY MUST DIE

TRAIL OF THE DAMNED

by Jack Barton

ONLY THEIR WEAPONS WERE ALIKE

TWO WHO WORE GUNS

by Lauran Paine

WOMEN MEANT GUN TROUBLE

RIDE NORTH

by Wilbur S. Peacock

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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AND KEEP IT OFF"**

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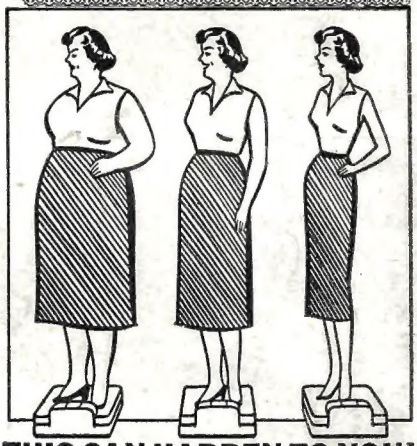

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THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 15, NO. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FALL, 1954

TRAIL OF THE DAMNED

John Garrett vowed to kill every man responsible for the death of his son, but every shot drove the woman he loved farther from him

JACK BARTON 8

TWO WHO WORE GUNS

Each came to kill but for reasons as different as the women they came to love. Nothing about them was alike except their sixguns

LAURAN PAINE 84

RIDE NORTH

Fred Vance wanted to ride north, free of the war that was brewing here, but he stayed on because of a girl—or two girls, in fact

WILBUR S. PEACOCK 107

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor

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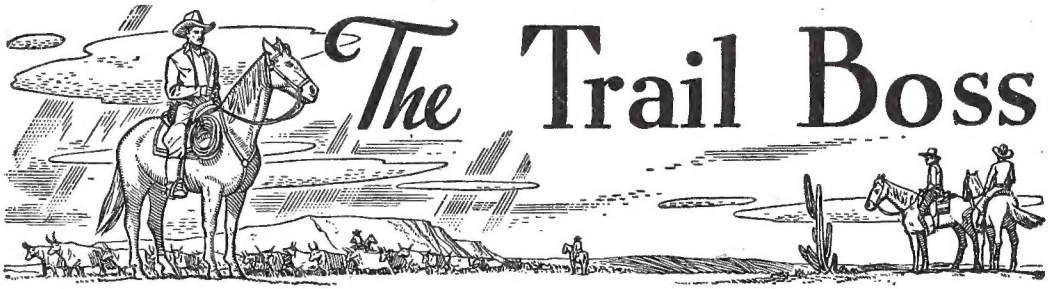

THE WOMAN HORSE THIEF

By Norman B. Wiltsey

ONE OF THE slickest horse thieves the old West ever produced was the crafty woman outlaw, Belle Starr. Far from being an over-publicized phony like Calamity Jane, Belle—nicknamed Battle Axe for the brand of he-man chewing tobacco she preferred—was actually the real McCoy as a female desperado. She was part Indian and rode like a full-blooded Comanche. A crack shot with either rifle or sixgun, Belle Starr is known to have killed at least two men in her spectacular career.

Operating mostly as a lone wolf out of the wild No Man's Land known as "The Strip" west of the Arkansas line, Belle stole horses from farms and ranches all over the state and surrounding territory. She rode for a time with the Broken Bow gang of outlaws whose hide-out lay deep in Indian Territory.

No Piker, Belle

A sheriff's posse raided the outlaw camp one midnight and indiscriminately shot up the whole outfit. Hit in the shoulder, Belle escaped on her fast Steeldust mare and holed up in a settler's cabin for a month until the ugly bullet wound healed. Upon her departure, Belle left $300 with the settler and his wife to pay for a much-needed operation on the couple's crippled child. The grateful settler never did find out the identity of his mysterious guest and generous benefactress.

Battle Axe Belle's cleverest horse stealing stunt occurred at Hot Springs, Arkansas, when she was about twenty-seven years old. Dressed up in "woman duds" and enjoying a vacation at the race track after a successful horse deal in Texas, Belle spotted a couple of sleek Kentucky thoroughbreds in the feature race of the day.

Knowing superior horseflesh when she saw it, Belle plunked down a whopping bet on the pair. One of the steeds, named Spurs, romped home first, and the other, tagged Wings, breezed in third. Cashing her bet, Belle decided that she had to have both those horses, come hell, sheriffs, or high water. Carefully she laid her plans.

The Jug Trick

That evening Belle dispatched a gallon of corn whiskey to the groom guarding the stalls of the coveted thoroughbreds. Both horses were owned by the same man and were stalled side by side at the track stable, thus making it easier for Battle Axe to work her scheme.

After enjoying a leisurely dinner at her hotel, Belle judged the corn licker had done its work. Strolling down to the track stable, she boldly entered the row of box stalls. As she figured, Battle Axe found the stable boy dead to the world in the straw with the partly empty jug beside him on the floor.

The rest was simple for a horse thief of Belle Starr's skill and experience. Riding Spurs bareback and leading Wings, Battle Axe took off hell-for-leather for the Broken Bow country. The befuddled authorities and the anguished owner never caught up with her, and Belle traded off her prize catch within the month for two hundred head of breeding mares which she used to start a ranch of her own.

Unlike some of her infamous contemporaries, Battle Axe turned respectable in her last years and died peacefully in bed instead of being gunned down by a sheriff's posse or outraged horse owner. She died on her own HEL Ranch and was buried at the forks of Little River under her correct name, Helen Law.

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TRAIL

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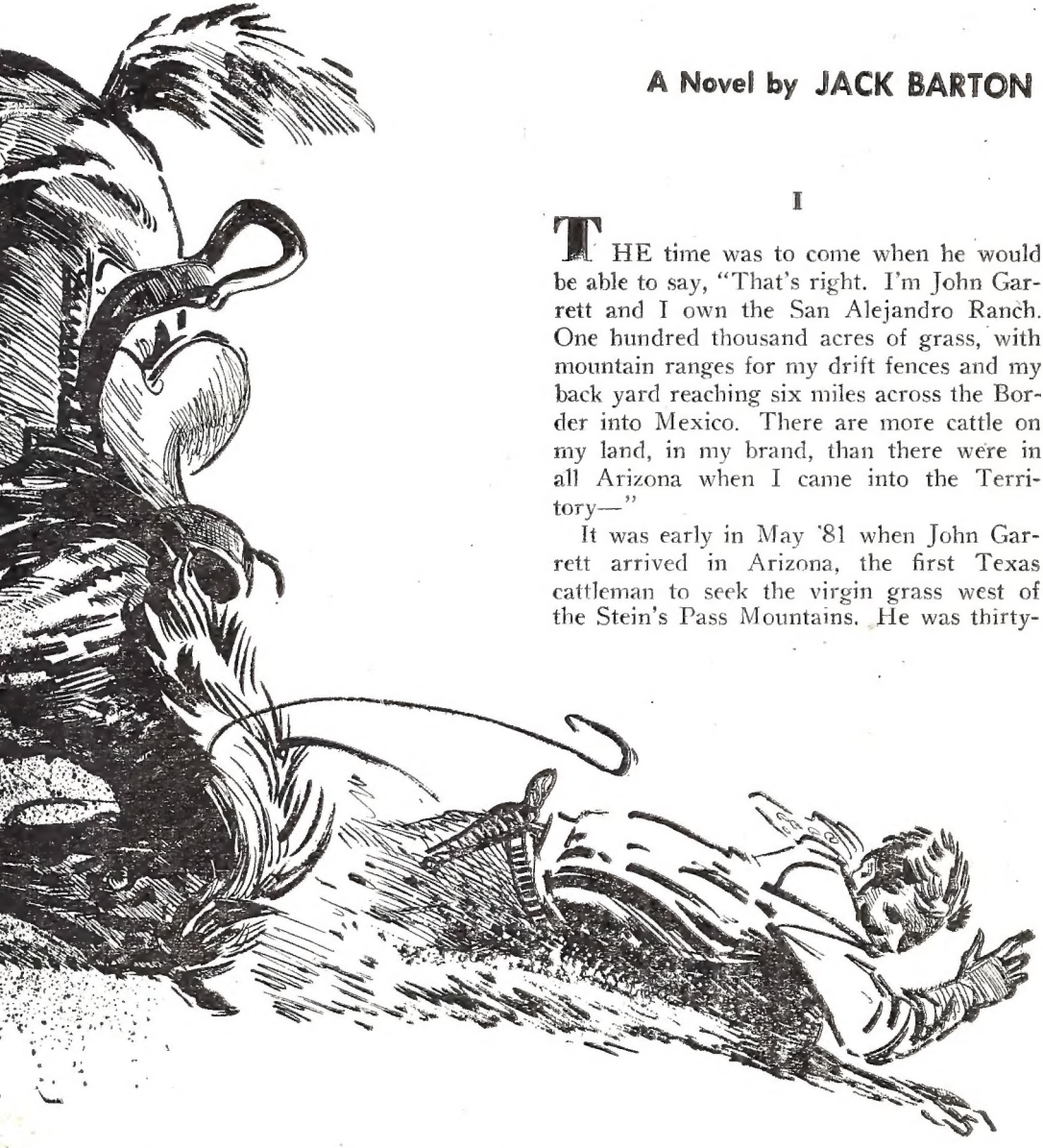
A Novel by JACK BARTON



I

THE time was to come when he would be able to say, "That's right. I'm John Garrett and I own the San Alejandro Ranch. One hundred thousand acres of grass, with mountain ranges for my drift fences and my back yard reaching six miles across the Border into Mexico. There are more cattle on my land, in my brand, than there were in all Arizona when I came into the Territory—"

It was early in May '81 when John Garrett arrived in Arizona, the first Texas cattleman to seek the virgin grass west of the Stein's Pass Mountains. He was thirty-

The man from Texas had plenty of business in Arizona—a ranch to save, a woman to hold, and a death to avenge!

eight then, just reaching his prime, though he looked ahead with but mild eagerness to the new life beyond the mountains, for he felt he had already lived a full life.

This feeling came to him at times when he looked at his son, Dan. Or when the memory of Ellen was sharpest. His wife lay in a lonely grave back in the Brazos River country these dozen years.

His outfit consisted of a herd of twenty-five hundred snaky, saber-horned cattle, a remuda of a hundred and fifty broncs, a chuckwagon and a hoodlum wagon—and a trail crew as hard and fit as himself. It included Dan, too, and the English remittance man, Forsythe, the boy's tutor.

Garrett had trailed the outfit from the Brazos across the treeless plains of the Llano Estacado where he and his men had fought off a Comanche war party, through the bitter Pecos River country to the Seven Rivers and over the Sacramento Mountains. Across the White Sands, the volcanic desert of the Mal Pais, and the Jornado del Muerto. Across the Rio Grande in spring flood.

And now, John Garrett sat his horse and looked toward the last mountain range over which he must snake his outfit.

The herd, strung out for a mile and more, looked gaunt even for Texas longhorns. Riders jogged past, tired men on tired horses, one calling out, "Just over the mountains, eh, Boss?"

Garrett smiled. "Just over the mountain, Sarbo."

A red fog of dust churned up. The smell of the cattle was strong, their bawling loud. The weariness of hundreds of miles of hard trail was an ache in the core of John Garrett. Yet in spirit he was content. He was close to the earth, and to the creatures that thrived on the greenness of the earth. He would have it no other way.

A RIDER came loping back, reining in at sight of Garrett.

"Sir!"

"Take it easy, son. Catch your breath."

"But, sir—"

The boy was sixteen. He smiled sheepishly at his own excitement then, imitating his father's calm, he placed his hands on his saddle-horn, leaned forward, drew a deep breath. Garrett regarded him with half-hidden fondness, thinking that he was not as stern with the boy as he should be. There was a reason for his laxity, of course. He looked at Dan and saw Ellen. The boy resembled his mother that much.

It was odd that a man could sire a son and give him nothing of his character, physical or mental. Dan not only did not have his gray eyes and blond hair and ruddy complexion, being dark of hair and eyes and sallow of skin, but he would never have his height nor his breadth of shoulder. Nor would he ever possess the stability, the ability to discipline himself, no matter how hard he tried.

Yet it would be a mistake, Garrett reflected, to try to fit the son into the father's mold. Dan must find his niches in a world other than that of cattle and horses and green grass under a blue sky. He had inherited his mother's gentle nature.

"It's like this, sir—a bunch of men up ahead want to stop the herd."

"So? And for what?"

"They want to trail-cut it."

Garrett frowned. "Well, what they want is not what they'll get." He lifted his reins. "Let's go tell them so."

He picked up Pete Sarbo and another swing rider, Tobe Adams, as he rode toward point of the herd with his son. As they emerged from the dust cloud, Garrett saw that his wagons had been halted by eight horsemen. One of his point riders, old Charlie Harms, came to meet him. He reined in a hundred yards from the trail-cutters.

"What do they say, Charlie?"

"That we picked up some of their cattle back along the trail."

"And they aim to cut the herd, eh?"

"That's about it. And they're a tough-looking lot."

Garrett took out a cigar, bit off the nub, lighted it. "I'll read the riot act to them, Charlie. You and Pete and Tobe cover me. If you see me draw my revolver, open fire—and shoot to kill. I'm not letting the herd be cut."

"Dad! I ought to have a gun!"

Garrett looked at him, a refusal on the tip of his tongue. Then knew that to be

turned down would make Dan feel small when he wanted to feel like a man. At sixteen he himself had owned several guns.

"I suppose you should," he said, and drew his Winchester from its boot. "You're to take orders from Charlie. Savvy?"

Dan reached for the rifle, his face aglow. "Yes, sir!"

Garrett smiled as he rode slowly out to meet the trail-cutters. The risk wasn't too great. He had a hunch that these men wouldn't put up a fight, though they were a hard-looking lot, a wolfish bunch. He reined in twenty feet from them.

One man dominated the group by his dapper appearance. He wore black broadcloth with a flowered vest. Draped across the vest was a heavy gold watch-chain. He was a solidly built man with a neatly trimmed beard, but behind the beard his face was slack and soft with the weakness of his character. Garrett's gaze settled on him.

"You're the leader here?"

"No. I just rode along to see that my friends get a square deal."

"Oh? Well, who are your friends in need of a square deal?"

"Talk to me, Texas," another man said. "The Dude just came along for the hell of it. It's Jake and me that's got a crow to pick with you."

Garrett shifted his gaze to a rougher-looking man than the one called Dude. "All right, friend. What's your complaint?"

THE rider kneed his horse forward, and a younger man somewhat resembling him in ruddy complexion and heavy features, moved with him. They reined in directly before Garrett.

"Jake and Ed Reagan," the older man said. "Reagan's a big man in these parts. We've got a brother named Matt who's plenty important over in Tombstone."

"All right. I'm impressed. Now what's the trouble?"

"You've been trailing across our range the past couple of days. Your herd's picked up some of our cattle." Ed Reagan grinned. "We aim to have them back."

"No."

"No? What the hell do you mean by that?"

"I mean no to whatever you want, Reagan."

"Now, listen, Texas—"

"My name is Garrett. John Garrett." He took a long drag on his cigar, watching Ed Reagan's face turn ugly. "Hell, you're not the first trail-cutters I've met up with. I've run up against a half-dozen bunches of your breed across New Mexico, all with the same story. We've seen damn few cattle in this part of the Territory, and what few we've seen, we've driven away from our herd. You're not cutting my herd, Reagan, and taking any of my cattle. I'm not even going to argue about it. The next move is up to you."

"You claiming we want to steal some of your cattle?"

"Yeah, I'm doing just that."

Ed Reagan swore. "I won't be called a thief, Garrett."

"Then don't give me reason to call you one," Garrett said. "I've got no cattle of yours mixed with mine, and I'm not giving you a chance to cut out a couple dozen with hard-to-read brands and claim them as yours. That's final."

The younger Reagan gigged his mount forward. There was a wildness in Jake Reagan's eyes, and his right hand was gripping the butt of his gun.

"Damn you, Garrett, you won't talk so rough with a slug in your guts!"

"Nor will you, friend. Have you no eyes in your head?"

"Why, you—"

His brother caught his wrist. "Quit it, you fool! Can't you see his riders have got you beaded?" He said to Garrett, "Have it your way—for now. But Arizona is the Reagans' stamping-ground. You'll be hearing from us." He yelled, "Come on—come on!" to the band, and all but the bearded Dude rode away with him.

Garrett stared at Dude. "Well, what's on your mind?"

"All they expected was fifty head. It would have been cheap at the price."

"Cheap for what, friend?"

"To keep from having trouble with the Reagans," the Dude said. "Take my advice. Watch yourself from now on."

"Thanks. Now I'll give you some advice, Dude. Quit the bad company you're keeping, especially if they plan on hunting trouble with me."

Dude laughed, and rode after the others.

Garrett's son and the three riders who had backed him with their Winchesters joined him.

Charlie Harms said, "Boss, I sure thought there'd be fireworks. That was a hell of a chance you took."

Garrett shook his head. "They were running a bluff. Eight of them against twenty of us? No, they've got more sense than to pick a fight they couldn't win." He glanced at his son. "Dan, how do you like the feel of that rifle?"

"Just fine."

"All right," Garrett said. "Now go get Forsythe to show you how to shoot it."

He turned away toward the plodding herd.

II

GARRETT came in from riding a circle about the camp, dismounted and left his horse ground-hitched. He walked to the cookfire behind the chuckwagon, filled a tin cup with coffee.

It was a black night, the night of the third day since the outfit had encountered the Reagan crowd. Nothing had been seen of the trail-cutters since, but Garrett had sighted a settlement that afternoon, and had a hunch that the Reagan brothers and their friends would be there, planning some deviltry, likely.

The herd was quiet. The cattle had watered at sundown and were now held on a broad grass flat just north of the camp. The remuda was not far to the south. The outfit, sprawled for a quarter-mile across the flat, was west of the mountains now, in the Territory of Arizona.

Garrett looked about as he sipped his coffee. Most of the hands were bedded down, asleep, but two figures were beside a fire over by the hoodlum wagon. The night was so still that the murmur of their voices reached Garrett, who strolled toward the fire. His son was reading aloud from a book while the Englishman, Eric Forsythe, listened with a sleepy look on his angular face. Garrett could make no sense out of what Dan was reading. He cleared his throat and both looked up.

"What's that you two are staying awake to read?"

"Hamlet, Dad."

"Ah?"

"Will Shakespeare, my dear fellow," Forsythe said. "You've heard of the Bard, have you not? I want to give your son a well-rounded education—and the Bard is important. Rather."

"I suppose you're right," Garrett said. "Good night."

He walked to where his own blankets were spread, removing only his hat, coat and gun-rig. He lay gazing up at the few stars in the dark, clouded sky, thinking of his son. In another year, Forsythe had said, the boy would be ready for a school that would prepare him for some Eastern university.

Dan had been woefully short of learning when Forsythe had happened along six months ago. The only school within riding distance of the old ranch back on the Brazos had lacked a schoolteacher most of the time, and Garrett had refused to let Dan live away from home. The boy had been his weapon against loneliness.

But the time was drawing near when he must let him go, for Dan's own sake. Garrett was well aware that his son was not cut out to be a cattleman. And Forsythe agreed. The Englishman had said, "We've got to let him discover his hidden talents." Forsythe had gone on to say that Dan had a fine mind, a mind more concerned with books than with cattle and horses and grass and water. And the books Dan preferred did not deal with what John Garrett considered practical matters.

So in another year Dan would leave. And Garrett knew he would be the loneliest of men.

He turned over onto his side and listened drowsily to the murmur of Dan's voice reading Shakespeare. . . .

It seemed that he'd been asleep but a minute or two when a gunshot woke him. He pushed himself up on his elbows, on the

thought that the shot had been part of a dream. But his men were leaping from their beds, and a shout lifted:

"Stampede!"

A gun blasted again—once, twice, a third time.

Garrett grabbed his hat and gun-rig, and ran for his horse. The hands were snatching up their saddles and heading for their staked-out horses. The noise of the herd in motion was a swelling roar.

From the saddle, Garrett shouted, "Watch it! Watch yourselves!"

He wasn't sure that the spooked herd was headed directly toward the camp, but the rising thunder of sound told him that it was coming south. He swung away, lifting his horse to a run, and almost at once saw the black mass of cattle bearing down on him—a Juggernaut traveling at express-train speed!

He was forced to gallop to keep from being run down, and a backward glance showed him the herd engulfing the camp, showed the hoodlum wagon toppling. A man's wild yell lifted above the din of the stampede, and ahead Garrett saw the night-hawk trying to move the remuda out of the way. The horses bolted in panic, the night-hawk after them.

GARRETT gave his mount its head, and the cow pony swerved away as the vanguard of the herd was on the verge of overtaking it. As the cattle streamed past, the pounding of hoofs and the clashing of horns reaching a high crescendo, Garrett could feel the heat from those panicked, racing animals. A rider came along behind him, yelling something. It was Pete Sarbo. They tried to turn the leaders, to put the entire herd into a milling that would gradually bring it to a stop. But the leaders whipped away, and Sarbo's horse took a horn in the shoulder and went down in a thrashing heap.

Garrett jerked his horse to a halt, saw that Sarbo had been thrown clear but was not picking himself up. Drawing his six-shooter, Garrett fired into the herd and that portion of it bearing down on the fallen man swerved away from the muzzle flashes.

Garrett shouted, "Pete, for God's sake!"

The man rose as Garrett's gun fired its last load. He gave Sarbo his left stirrup and the man came up behind him. The cow pony struck out of its own accord, not needing Garrett's hands on the reins. They pulled clear of the cattle, and by the time Sarbo dropped to the ground, the entire herd had swept past and was being swallowed up in the darkness. The other riders galloped by, following the stampede. Sarbo stood there shaking his head.

"John, that was close."

"Yeah. And damn the man who fired that shot!"

"It wasn't one of the night herders. We've got no loco fools in this crew."

Garrett nodded. "You know who it was, Pete."

"Yeah. That Reagan crowd."

Old Charlie Harms came along. "Boss—"

"Yeah, Charlie?"

Harms said nothing.

Fear touched John Garrett, got a viselike hold on him. "Who, Charlie?"

"The boy. Your son. . . ."

They wouldn't let John Garrett see his son. They talked him out of it. They'd covered the body with a blanket, and the entire crew was there when he knelt beside his dead son. The cattle were miles away, scattered to hell-and-gone; and as word had spread the men had ridden back to the wrecked camp to dismount and silently watch the big man let grief have its way with him.

They were rough men, men hardened to sudden death. They had all seen men die beneath the hoofs of stampeding cattle. But they were touched. They respected John Garrett, and, though some had thought Dan a pale shade of his father, they had liked the boy. And to a man they thought sixteen too young to die.

They saw Garrett cover his face with his hands, saw his shoulders shake, heard him sob. They looked at each other helplessly. One swore, one wiped away the tears. At last Eric Forsythe, who had been closer to Dan than any of the others, went to Garrett and placed a hand on his shoulder. Nothing was said, but in another half-minute Garrett rose.

"We'll bury him at sunup," Forsythe said

softly. "You'll choose the spot, Mr. Garrett?"

"Thanks," said Garrett, and walked to his men, his face hard now. Hard. He said, "Did anybody get a look at the man or men who fired those shots.?"

Frank Ives, who had been on night herd said, "I got a look at them. They fired one shot and the herd spooked. I started after the cattle, then I saw those hombres. They beat it—all but one who fired two shots at me. My first shot knocked him out of the saddle. The rest got away."

"Come with me, Frank. I want to look at the one you downed."

Several others rode with him and Ives, and beyond what had been the herd's bed ground, they came upon a horse with trailing reins. It took them a little longer to find the man Frank Ives had shot but, coming upon him, they dismounted and Charlie Harms held a lighted match while Ives rolled the body over.

Harms said, "He's one of them, John. One of that Reagan crowd."

"Yeah. And there were eight of them."

"Eight is right."

"That's seven to get."

Harms said, "We're with you, John. We can go after them tonight, and maybe find them at that settlement north of here. Or maybe they'll try to grab some of our cattle tomorrow, now that they've got the herd scattered over all creation, and we can jump them then. Which will it be?"

"It'll be tonight."

"All right," Harms said, got back in the saddle and rode toward the camp. . . .

THE Mexican held his sombrero against his chest and bowed to John Garrett. He said, "I have done no wrong, señor, I swear it!" The match Pete Sarbo had struck for light flickered out. But the man from the settlement—Grazia Plaza—had seen only the ugly look on Garrett's face. He said again. "I have done no wrong, señor."

Pete Sarbo had been to the settlement and brought the man back with him, at gunpoint. They now were in a brush-grown gully south of the settlement. Garrett looked down at the man from the saddle.

"Quit worrying, friend. Nobody's going to harm you. There are some gringos in the plaza, two of them named Reagan. Where do they hang out?"

"At the cantina, señor."

"All of them?"

"All but one. A man named Slade is missing tonight."

"Where are their horses?"

"Around back there is a corral."

"There's a back door to the cantina?"

"*Sí!*"

Garrett nodded. "All right. You stay here for a little while, and you'll come to no harm." He glanced at Sarbo. "Pete, take half a dozen of the hands and cover the rear of the place."

Sarbo asked, "You want them alive, John?"

"I'd rather not have the bother of hanging them, Pete."

"Suits me."

Sarbo led six of the crew from the gully. Garrett led the others directly toward the single street of Grazia Plaza. The cantina was the only lighted building. Garrett halted just short of it where all dismounted.

Charlie Harms said, "How much of a chance are we giving them, John?"

"Damn little. I don't want any of you men killed."

"We going in after them?"

"Unless I can get them out of there," Garrett said.

He walked toward the doorway, but before he reached it a man appeared there. It was the younger Reagan, Jake. A startled yelp escaped him as he saw Garrett and his trail-hands. He grabbed for his gun, screamed, "Ed!" He swung his gun up, firing with such haste that his slug went over Garrett's head.

He was thumbing back the hammer of his weapon for a second shot when Garrett fired. Jake Reagan cried out, dropped his gun, and fell to his knees in the doorway. Garrett ran forward, placed his boot against the man's body and sent him sprawling to the floor. He leaped over Jake and saw a wild scrambling of men within the cantina. Ed Reagan had started toward his brother, but halted and brought his gun to bear on Garrett but before he could open fire, the man called Dude drove a shot at the big hanging lamp, the only source of illumi-

nation. The lamp shattered and the cantina was plunged into sooty darkness. A gun fired—Ed Reagan's gun—its muzzle flashes giving Garrett a mark. He fired twice, and heard a man cry out.

Reagan's gun went silent, and Garrett shouted at his men crowding into the place behind him, "Hold it! There's other men here besides the ones we want!"

Men were yelling and cursing as they sought a way out of the trap. Somebody fired a shot at the far side of the room, and Garrett and two of his men answered it. Then came a racket of guns from behind the place, with men yelling there.

And abruptly it was sharply quiet.

"A light!" Garrett called. "Somebody strike a light!"

A voice said, "*Uno minuto, señor!*"

A match flared behind the bar, a candle was lighted, pale light pushed back the darkness. Garrett saw only Mexicans rising from behind the bar and tables. One man lay sprawled on the floor, his body grotesquely twisted in death. It was not Ed Reagan.

Garrett glanced over his shoulder. "What about the one by the door, Charlie?"

"Dead," Harms said. "Good and dead."

There was a window open at the side of the room, and Garrett supposed somebody had escaped through it. With two of his men following him, he passed along a hallway, looking into the rooms off it. No one was hiding in them. A man was sprawled on the ground beyond the back door. Another dead man lay ten feet farther away. Neither was Ed Reagan.

PETE SARBO and his men came forward from the shadows. "Only two came through, John. They got a couple shots off before we cut them down." He saw Garrett looking at the men behind him. "None of us got hit."

Garrett nodded. "Three got away. Out a window. They can't have got far, and they won't if we keep them from getting their horses. We'll wait it out and see what happens."

They waited the night out, but the three men who had escaped made no attempt to get their horses from the corral. At dawn Garrett mounted and rode out alone, circling the settlement. He cut sign a half mile from Grazia Plaza—the tracks of three men afoot. Spurred by impatience, he covered several miles without sighting his quarry. Slowing to a walk then, he sought their tracks again but saw nothing until reaching a broad arroyo running north and south. He rode several miles in each direction, and finally saw the tracks of one man in the sandy bottom of the gully. He left the arroyo, and shortly sighted a moving speck far across the desert.

He rode the man down, identifying him as the Dude. His approach sent the Dude running for a cluster of boulders in a hollow. Dude fired twice at long range. Garrett kept riding toward him at a walk until the range made him too easy a target, then he dismounted, taking his saddle-gun, and sank to a prone shooting position.

Dude fired again, then called, "Garrett, for God's sake!"

"That's right, Dude—pray."

"Be reasonable, man! All we did was stampede your herd!"

"My son was killed in that stampede, Dude."

"It was Ed Reagan's idea, not mine, Garrett!"

"I warned you about the company you were keeping."

"Listen, Garrett! I'm a family man and —"

"Too bad," Garrett said, and drove his shot home.

He rose at once and turned to his horse, knowing that no second shot was needed. Then he thought of what Dude had said about being a family man. Somewhere, somebody would wonder what had happened to him. They should at least know that he was dead. Garrett went into the rocks, knelt by the body, went through the Dude's pockets. He found nothing that revealed the man's name. There was a fine gold watch and chain, however, that might be the means of identifying him later, and Garrett pocketed it. He returned to his horse, mounted, struck out toward Grazia Plaza.

Ed Reagan and the other one would have to wait.

John Garrett had his son to bury.

III

IT TOOK the better part of three days for Garrett and his riders to round up the stampeded cattle, and then a tally showed that they were eighteen head short. Garrett accepted the loss for, compared to the death of his son, it meant nothing.

As the outfit got under way again, he rode back to the boy's grave—the mound of earth and the rock cairn—and dismounted. He stood there a long time, his head bowed, then mounted and rode slowly away.

The trail led across the Sam Simon Valley and around the northern end of the Chiricahuas, then into Sulphur Springs Valley. On the eastern slopes of the Dragoons, after seven weeks on the trail, the outfit went into camp. Beyond the Dragoons was the booming silver town of Tombstone.

The second day in camp, with his cattle scattered over the vast expanse of grass, Garrett told Pete Sarbo, "I'm going over the mountains to Tombstone, Pete. While I'm gone, you'll be in charge."

"All right, John. But—"

"But what, Pete?"

"If you're counting on finding Ed Reagan and the other one in Tombstone, you'd better not go alone."

"I'll take Forsythe with me."

"Forsythe!"

Garrett nodded, and Sarbo, though looking worried, held his tongue. There was no reasoning with John Garrett these days. It was impossible even to hold a conversation with him. Sarbo stood there watching his boss and the Englishman saddle their horses, his Indian-dark face a mask of concern. Pete Sarbo was a little afraid of a man with hatred in his soul.

Garrett rode through the mountains in a brooding silence, and Eric Forsythe, understanding, made no attempt at conversation. In his way, Forsythe was as concerned as Pete Sarbo over the man's withdrawal into himself, and feared that the death of his son had left Garrett a little mad. He had heard how ruthless Garrett had been in avenging Dan's death, and had been shocked. He had considered the man a stripe above the average men encountered here in this amazing country, but the thin veneer of civilization that covered the man had worn through.

Forsythe had admired John Garrett for his strength of character and his native intelligence; he had come to overlook the fact that Garrett was untutored. Now he was so awed by the man's calm savagery that he was uncomfortable in his presence.

Garrett rode as if possessed of a demon, and Forsythe, hard put to keep up with him, wondered if his companion were not determined to destroy himself. Ancient law demanded an eye for an eye, a life for a life; but this man, Forsythe reflected, demanded far more. Six men had died already, and two more were marked for death. Forsythe hoped they would not encounter those two doomed men in the oddly named Tombstone.

It was an ugly town, but it throbbed with life and its bloodstream was the wealth of its fabulous mines. It had mushroomed almost over night in defiance of the Apaches, and had attracted far more than a fair share of the badmen and riffraff and parasites who found here a happy hunting-ground. Eric Forsythe took it in with the wide-eyed interest of a man who liked to observe but not sample lusty life. John Garrett looked neither to right nor left, but led the way to the OK Corral where they put up their horses.

He said, "If you've got anything you want to do, go do it. There's a hotel called the Belle Union. I'll meet you there tonight."

"You're quite sure you don't want me to stay with you?"

"No."

"Very well. But—You'll be careful?"

Garrett nodded, and turned away.

He strode along Allen Street and turned into the office of the sheriff of Cochise County who was, currently, Jess Quartermane. He found Quartermane and one of his deputies in his office, the sheriff at his desk, writing.

The deputy gave casual attention to Garrett. "Something we can do for you?"

"I want to talk to the sheriff."

"What about?"

"I'll tell him, friend."

"The sheriff's busy."

Garrett said, "I'll wait," and took out and lighted a cigar.

THE deputy went over and spoke to Quartermane, and shortly the sheriff put down his pen, leaned back in his chair, nodded in Garrett's direction. He was a big, florid man, coarsely-handsome, with an air of self-importance. He gestured to a chair as Garrett approached.

"What can I do for you?"

"Garrett is my name. John Garrett. I'm from Texas, and I've trailed a herd in from there and I intend to ranch over on the east side of the Dragoons. I—"

"You've picked a good location."

"Yes."

"Close to markets for beef. This town and others, and the Army posts."

"Yes."

Quartermane lifted his eyebrows at Garrett's flat tone. He said, "So you didn't come here to talk cattle. What is on your mind?"

"I ran into some trouble on the other side of Stein's Pass. A bunch of men tried to cut my herd. I didn't let them. Later, near a town called Grazia Plaza, this same bunch stampeded my herd one night. My son was killed in the stampede. I went after that crowd. I got all but two of them."

Quartermane exchanged glances with his deputy. "You don't fool around, do you?"

"I'm reporting this so that the record is straight."

"All right."

"I'm going to get the two men that got away, Sheriff. I want the record straight on that, too."

Quartermane frowned. "What the hell is this, Garrett? Are you throwing some challenge at me?"

"I just want you to know what's happening—if I find those two here."

"Don't find them here, Garrett. If you kill them here in Tombstone, I'll do my duty."

Garrett stood up. "Just so we understand each other, Sheriff."

"You're not taking a hell of a lot of pains to make friends in a new country."

"I don't want friends in a country where a bunch like that is permitted to operate," Garrett said. "If I find those two and kill them, watch yourself when you come after me."

Quartermane regarded him, "I'll do that, Garrett. And I've a hunch that I'll be coming after you sooner or later. If it's a fight you want with me, you'll get it. But, hell, I'm not anxious for trouble with a Texas cattleman. We've got trouble-makers enough around here without a man like you going on the prod. What makes you think you'll find your men in Tombstone?"

"One bragged that he had a brother who is a big man in this town."

"Oh? Who's that?"

"Matt Reagan."

Quartermane's face went blank, the deputy made a choking sound. After a moment, Quartermane said, "So you tangled with Matt Reagan's brothers?"

"And Ed Reagan is one of the two I'm gunning for."

"What about Jake?"

"He's dead."

The deputy whistled softly, and the sound was somehow ominous.

Jess Quartermane shook his head. "Garrett, I'm going to give you a warning. Clear out of Tombstone. Put the Dragoons between you and Matt Reagan. You'll meet up with him and Ed soon enough. They'll come hunting you, if Jake is dead because of you. Meet them on your own stamping-ground."

"Where do I find Matt Reagan, Sheriff?"

"I wouldn't know."

"What's he do?"

"I wouldn't know that, either. But I know you won't get to Ed through him."

Garrett gave him a long, chill look, then turned away. Before he reached the door, he turned back, took the Dude's watch from his pocket and laid it down before the sheriff.

"One of the Reagan crowd called himself Dude," he said. "Before he died in a gunfight with me, he claimed he was a family man. If he was, his family should be notified that he's dead. If you don't know the man, maybe you can find out his name through that watch. The initials 'B M' are engraved on the case."

QUARTERMANE examined the watch. He glanced at his deputy. "Al, you know anybody called Dude?"

"I've known a dozen men called that."

"Well, I'll notify his family, Garrett, if I find out his name and where his home is." Quartermane eyed him curiously.

When Garrett left, Jess Quartermane said, "Al, get over to the Alhambra and tell Matt Reagan that there's a Texan named Garrett on the prod for his brother Ed."

Al rose, smiling. "Jess, you're not giving that *Tejano* much of a chance."

Quartermane was unsmiling. "That man is trouble. So he brought a herd to the Territory, did he? Well, where one Texas cattleman goes, others follow. And they bring their own brand of hell. You get over to the Alhambra. It won't take Garrett long to locate Matt Reagan."

Al went out, and Quartermane slipped the watch into his pocket and reached for his hat. He left the office and, striding along the street, nodded absentmindedly to people who greeted him. He turned into the Belle Union Hotel and stopped at the desk. The clerk spoke to him with a measure of deference.

Quartermane was curt. "You've got a Mrs. Maury here?"

"Yes, Sheriff. The lady is in Room Twelve."

Quartermane said, "Thanks," and turned toward the stairs.

Reaching the second floor, he knocked on the door of Room 12. It was opened by an extremely handsome but troubled-looking woman whose eyes lighted expectantly at sight of him. He removed his hat, his gaze dropping from the woman's face, to touch upon her full-bodied figure. She was in a negligee.

She said, "You've heard something of my husband, Sheriff Quartermane?"

"I—well, yes."

"It's not good news?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Maury. Could I come in while I tell you about it?"

She shrugged and opened the door wide. He entered and closed it, remained beside it. He took the watch from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Can you identify this, Mrs. Maury?"

She did not need to speak. Her eyes told him that the watch was her husband's.

She took the watch and turned from him, and in passing the window her figure was outlined by the sunlight. Quartermane thought, what a woman!

She sat down on the edge of the bed and held the watch in her hands, completely controlled. Quartermane's idea was that in such a situation a woman should go into hysterics. This one looked unfeelingly calm.

"This means that my husband is dead?"

"The man who brought it to me said that he took it off a dead man."

"Tell me the whole of it, Sheriff."

Quartermane was thinking that despite the beauty of her face and body she was probably cold. He was somehow disappointed, yet intrigued. He would like to find out what she was really like.

He said, "This man is a Texan. I never saw him before he walked into my office. He claims that he was trailing a herd of cattle into the Territory and some men stampeded his herd. His son was killed in the stampede. He went after these men and killed all but two of them. Then—"

"All but two?"

"He said there were eight."

"He killed six men?"

"He and his crew."

"And my husband was one of them?"

"So he said."

"I don't believe it."

Quartermane wondered where her tears were.

She looked at the watch. "But it's true, isn't it? My husband wasn't that sort of man, and yet—he was." As she looked at Quartermane, her face twisted with some sort of feeling, to become much less than beautiful. "It's true, and I've got to accept it. At least, that Ben Maury is dead. I won't—I can't—believe that he was with men who did such a thing, however. Sheriff, there's more to this than you've been told."

"I don't like this Texan, but I believe he told me the truth."

"I don't."

THE sheriff said, "I don't like to speak against your husband, Mrs. Maury. Certainly, not now when we know he's dead. But you hadn't heard from him for months. You came to the Territory to find him. It stands to reason that he was involved in

He was dimly conscious that Claire entered—with a man who must have been a doctor

something—well, something that was maybe foreign to his real nature and so, conscience-stricken, he quit writing to you. A lot of men turn out bad when they come West, Mrs. Maury. They fail to make out as they'd hoped, then get mixed up in something illegal. It could have been like that with Ben Maury."

"What was that something, Sheriff?"

"Well, the crowd he was with was a pretty tough bunch."

"Outlaws?"

"Close to being outlaws."

She shook her head. "My husband wouldn't become involved with outlaws. He wasn't dishonest. He wasn't even rough."

"Well, I'm sorry I had to bring you bad news."

"Who is this Texan?"

"His name is John Garrett. He's going to ranch on the other side of the mountains. He is rough, Mrs. Maury, but I don't think he's a liar."

"Is he still in Tombstone?"

"Yes. He's gunning for the two men who escaped him."

She said, "Will you ask him if he will talk with me?"

Quartermane nodded. "I'll do that."

He went out, then paused in the hall after closing the door. After a moment, he heard sobbing. He went on, satisfied. She wasn't cold and unfeeling. He would like to know Claire Maury better. Maybe he could arrange it.

IV

JOHN GARRETT was not long in learning where he could find Matt Reagan. A single question at the post office gave him the information. He set out for the Alhambra, wondering why Jess Quartermane had lied, saying he did not know where Matt Reagan could be found.

The Alhambra was a two-storied frame building painted a muddy yellow, but when Garrett pushed open the batwing doors he saw that it was far more ornate than saloons in Texas cowtowns.

The bar was darkly gleaming mahogany, and the back-bar mirror extended its full length of perhaps eighty feet. Above the mirror was a huge gilt-framed painting of a nude. On the opposite side of the room were marble-topped tables. Doorways opened into a pool room and a gambling room, and an open stairway led to a gallery at the second-floor level. Elaborate chandeliers cast a pale yellow light over the place. There were few customers at this hour, and only one bartender on duty.

Garrett said, "Matt Reagan?"

The bartender tipped his head toward the gallery. "Up in the office. First door beyond the stairs."

Garrett reached the stairs just as a man started down them—Quartermane's deputy, Al.

Garrett said, "You didn't waste any time getting here. So Matt Reagan *is* a big man in this town, then?"

Al chuckled. "He'd be the bull in any herd, Texas," he said, and turned away.

Upstairs, the first door along the gallery stood ajar. A man's deep voice sounded beyond it, and a woman's too-harsh laughter. Garrett pushed the door wide and entered. The man sat behind a desk, and the woman was perched on the edge of it.

The room was furnished with wine-red sofas and armchairs, and red Brussels carpet was on the floor. A red-shaded student lamp stood on the desk. Matt Reagan's string tie was maroon. The woman had hennaed hair. Garrett thought the man must like red in all shades.

The man said, "Garrett?"

"That's right, Reagan."

"I've been expecting you."

"I know. I saw Al leaving here."

"A good boy, Al."

"Quartermane's an even better boy, eh, Reagan? So you've got a line right into the sheriff's office, have you?"

Reagan laughed, but his eyes were guarded and wary. He was a bulky man of about forty, ruddy of complexion, dapper in gray broadcloth suit and flowered vest. As operator of the Alhambra, he fitted the role perfectly. Just as Garrett could have been nothing but a cattleman, Matt Reagan could have been only a saloonman.

He said, "Al told me you'd had some trouble with two of the Reagans."

"That's right. I settled it with Jake, but

Ed ran and I'm looking for him, Reagan."

"So Ed ran, did he? That's something new for a Reagan to do."

"Where is he, Matt?"

"Ed? I haven't seen him for months."

"Hell, Matt, don't try to shield him. He's a grown man."

Reagan's face hardened. "Listen, Jake and Ed were never worth a damn, but that doesn't mean I'd throw Ed to the wolves. Jake's dead by your gun and—"

"I thought you hadn't seen Ed in months."

"All right, so I've seen him."

"Where is he?"

The red-haired woman said, "Maybe you'd better tell him, Matt. He's got an ugly look in his eyes."

Reagan scowled at her. "Josie, get out of here."

She got off the desk, walked slowly around Garrett, looking him over, then went to the door and said from there, "Be careful, Matt. Handsome here is a dangerous man if I've ever seen one."

"Josie, get out."

"Sure, Matt. 'By, Texas."

She laughed and went out, closing the door behind her.

Garrett's hands were gripping a chair back. "All right, Matt—say it. There's no witness now."

REAGAN lighted a cigar, taking his time. He was a coarsely handsome man, but his scowl made him look merely tough. "I'm going to get you, Garrett."

"All right. So I'm warned."

"One way or another. Don't expect me to give you a fair chance."

"Brothers. The Reagan clan. Fight one, and you have to fight them all. The same old pattern, Matt."

"Like it's said, blood is thicker than water."

"Yeah, But why take a chance on spilling your own?"

Reagan puffed on his cigar. "I won't."

"Hired gunmen?"

"If that's the only way."

Garrett nodded. "I figured you for that sort, Matt. Now where's Ed?"

"Go to hell."

Garrett put the chair to one side, moved toward Reagan. The door opened, burst open, and two men stepped into the office, one saying, "Josie said you might need us, Boss."

His voice was as soft as a girl's, his complexion like a girl's. He was a slender youth wearing riding clothes and a tied-down gun-rig. Garrett might have been amused had he not seen the man's eyes and the wildness there.

The other man, the bartender, burly and red-faced, was armed with a short club that no doubt was lead-weighted.

Reagan said, "It could be that Josie was right. Do you two think you can give this Texan a working-over? He's probably fast with his gun."

"This fast?" said the kid, and drew his gun to cover Garrett. He had it cocked before it beaded the Texan. It was a smooth, fast draw that caught Garrett by surprise. The kid laughed. "Take him, Pat!"

The bartender rushed, his club lifted. Garrett didn't make the mistake of dodging or backing away, but moved in to meet the attack. He got in under the club, slamming hard against Pat's chest with his left shoulder. He tried to throw the man against the kid, but there was too much bulk to him. Pat's left-handed blow staggered him.

He saw the club descending, aimed at his head. He took the blow on his left shoulder, and was staggered again. Recovering, he caught up a straight-backed wooden chair with both hands and caught Pat alongside the head with it. The man collapsed. Garrett threw the chair at the youth, who jumped to one side. Before he could recover, Garrett had wrenched the gun from his hand.

Matt Reagan swore. "Blackie, you damn fool!"

Blackie cringed. Garrett slapped him hard across the face twice, and he reeled back against the wall and slumped there. Easing the gun off cock, Garrett threw it to the floor beneath a sofa and laughed, seeing Reagan's hands palm-down on the desk.

"That's right, Matt, play it safe—like Ed did when he ran."

But Garrett knew now that he wouldn't find out from Matt where his brother was, not even if he roughed him up. He walked

to the door, opened it, then looked back at Reagan.

"Don't send any gunmen, Matt. Because if you do, I'll take care of them, then come after you."

He went out, and Blackie began a loud cursing until Reagan shouted at him to shut up. The girl was at the back end of the bar when Garrett got downstairs. She watched him with a lively interest.

"So you're still whole, Texas?"

"Yeah. But no thanks to you. Where can I find Ed Reagan?"

"I don't know, but I can tell you one thing—he's not in Tombstone."

He studied her and decided that she was telling the truth. "Thanks," he said, and walked from the Alhambra.

On the opposite side of the street Garrett spotted a barber pole beyond the Bird Cage Theater, and absentmindedly felt the stubble of beard on his face. He crossed the street, ducking past the lead mules of a freight rig, and entered the barber shop. He'd had his shave and the barber was giving him a haircut when a man with no apparent need of a barbering entered the shop. Garrett's right hand closed over the butt of his revolver which lay on his lap beneath the barber's cloth.

THE man nodded to the barber who greeted him with "A nice day, eh, Mr. Wyatt?" He took one of the chairs along the wall and opened a newspaper—*The Epitaph.* He gave it his deep attention, not having so much as glanced at Garrett—a deliberate slight, it seemed to the Texan, who decided this Mr. Wyatt knew who was in the chair.

He was a man in his early thirties, of medium height and slight of build, sallow of complexion and sandy of hair and mustache. He was dressed as a townsman except for his wide-brimmed hat and high-heeled cowpuncher boots, his suit dark gray and the handiwork of a good tailor. His pale gray eyes never lifted from the paper, and thin lips smiled faintly over something he read.

The barber put aside his scissors. "Hair tonic, sir?"

"Sure."

Garrett submitted to the hair tonic and a brisk massage. Finally his hair was combed and the cover was whisked away, and he got from the chair with his gun in his hand. The barber eyed him with surprise, but Wyatt remained absorbed in his paper. Garrett holstered his gun, paid his bill, went to the clothes tree over by the door for his hat and coat.

Wyatt looked up at the barber. "Charlie, you got something to do in your back room?"

"Why, I guess I have."

Wyatt stood up as the barber left the room, faced Garrett. "I've been hearing about you, sir."

"Then you're one up on me."

"Wyatt. Dan Wyatt. You've never heard the name?"

"Yes, I have. I've heard it cursed."

Wyatt laughed. "By Texans, eh?"

"Texans and the sheriff of Dodge City never did hit it off."

"That's true. But Dodge has grown up."

Garrett nodded. "It was tame enough the last time I was there. What do you want with me, Wyatt?"

"Nothing. Except to mention that I'm Deputy United States Marshal for the Tombstone district and—" he took out and lighted a Mexican cigar—"to offer to help you find Ed Reagan."

"Where can I find Ed Reagan?"

"I don't know. I can only help you find him. I want the man, too, Garrett."

"As bad as I do?"

"I doubt it. I want him for stealing Army horses. You've got a bigger bill for him to pay. Look—there's a town over in the Chiricahuas named Trinity. It's not far from Galeyville. Both towns are outlaw hangouts. Well, Ed Reagan has a woman at Trinity, a Mexican woman named Maria. Ed won't stay away from her too long, I'd imagine."

"How come you're after him and the sheriff sides him?"

"Why bother yourself with the politics of this town, friend?"

Garrett considered that while he lighted a cigar. Then he said, "Well, thanks for what help you've given me. If I catch Ed Reagan, though, there won't be much left of him for you and the Army."

"We won't feel slighted."

"Anything more you can tell me, Marshal?"

"Nothing I can think of at the moment," Wyatt said. "Other than that you'll have to watch out for Matt Reagan. He'll try to even the score with you."

Garrett nodded. "That I know," he said, and left the shop.

Eric Forsythe was a little drunk when Garrett met him at the Belle Union Hotel where they had supper. The Englishman was in a self-pitying mood, suffering a sudden case of homesickness, and he admitted that drinking did him no good.

Garrett ate in silence. But Forsythe's tongue was loosened by the whisky he'd drunk. He complained about his lot. He was a younger son, and he'd been exiled—so he complained—because of some family reason that had to do with the eldest son of an upper-class English family inheriting estate and title while the other sons were sent to make their own way in the world. He'd been cast adrift, he told John Garrett, with a mere pittance. He received a remittance of twenty pounds sterling a month.

"Hardly enough," he said, "for a gentleman to keep up appearances."

"Then quit being a gentleman," Garrett said.

"Eh?" Forsythe eyed him stupidly. "But how does one go about doing that?"

"Just forget about it. It's all nonsense, anyway."

"Nonsense, eh? By Jove, I believe you may be right." Forsythe speculated for a minute or two. "Yes, I believe you may be bloody well right. The two of us should undergo a change of character, what?"

GARRETT frowned at him. "You're finding fault with me as well as with yourself?"

"Well, old man, you have become something of a bounder."

"How so?"

"This business of setting yourself up as judge, jury and executioner. It's a beastly thing, rather. Much worse than my being a

MEDICINE MAN'S WISDOM

MANY interesting tales are told about the North American Indians' medicine men. But little is known of the effectiveness of the way they treated their patients.

Just the other day Dr. Daniel Johnson, of the University of California, found that leptonin, a substance made from an old Indian bitter root, shows some promise of controlling the growth of a rare fungus which produces a serious disease affecting residents of the big central valley of California.

When I was a youngster and a foot hurt me, my mother used an old Indian remedy, and wrapped about the painful joint a piece of flannel soaked in a nice-smelling oil of wintergreen. Some years later, chemists found that this oil contained salts of salicylic acid, which modern doctors still use with good effect in cases of rheumatic fever. Later, other chemists made a related drug, called acetyl salicylic acid, which is the aspirin so universally used today.

This is a good example of how an Indian remedy came to be used by physicians, first as the essential oil, later as an extracted methyl salicylate, later as a sodium salicylate, and later as a synthetic cetyl salicylic acid.

Today many doctors are trying to lower high blood pressure with extracts of an old Indian medicine man's drug called Varetrum viride. Unfortunately, it is not entirely satisfactory because the poisonous dose is so close to the effective dose. A drug can never be very satisfactory if the dose that is safe enough for 4 men is likely to make the fifth one pretty sick.

But nevertheless, for ages the wise old Indian medicine men knew the formula for successful remedy healing, and modern doctors have benefitted from them. ***—Tex Mumford***

gentleman, you know."

Garrett stared, his face hardening. But before he could reply, he saw Quartermane's deputy, Al, approaching their table. Al was an amiable man, at least on the surface, and he smiled now as he took one of the vacant chairs at the table.

"The sheriff wants to see you, Garrett," he announced.

"He does? Well, if you could find me, he can, too."

"He'd like you to stop around and see him."

"Once was enough, Al. I got nothing out of seeing him that once."

"Maybe this time it will be different."

Garrett shook his head. "There won't be any this time. I'm riding out as soon as I've finished supper. If Quartermane wants to see me, he'll have to come here, and not waste any time about it."

Al stood up. "I'll tell him that," he said, and left.

It had grown dark while they were at supper, and when they left the hotel, they found Allen Street far livelier than it had been during the afternoon. The deadfalls were crowded with miners, freighters, and men of doubtful occupations. There was a line-up in front of the Bird Cage Theater. Tombstone was still not a community of homes, few wives, daughters and sisters were to be seen.

It was a blatant, rowdy place, and yet it was in the first flush of its boom, and John Garrett sensed that—Tombstone's wildest days were yet to come. He saw it as a market for beef, but beyond that it had no attraction for him. The lure of the saloons, the gaming-rooms and parlor houses did not tempt him at all.

In another fashion, the town filled him with disgust. He'd had a glimpse of what was apparently a struggle for power in the town, a struggle between Jess Quartermane and Dan Wyatt. He had reason to believe that men like Matt Reagan were behind the sheriff, while he could only speculate upon the sort of men who supported the deputy United States marshal, or perhaps made use of him. As with Tombstone's politics, business also would have its conniving factions and a man got the feeling that the town's treasure, its silver, was bloodstained before it was ever mined.

Walking along the street with Forsythe, Garrett heard a babel of voices—Irish brogue, guttural German, sing-song Chinese, the deep-South brawl, the soft Spanish of the Mexicans and, always loudest of all, the strident voices of the Anglo-Americans who, more than all the others together, made a boom town the rowdy place they felt it needed to be.

Turning into the OK Corral, Garrett and Forsythe saddled their horses, Garrett paying the hostler for the animals' keep. They were about to mount when a gunshot crashed out with a flat blast of sound.

Garrett heard the shriek of the slug and, giving Forsythe a shove that sent him behind the horses, drew his gun as he swung around. Another shot racketed, and he saw the muzzle flash and the dark shape of the man behind the gun. He fired once, and saw the man go to his knees but attempt to shoot again. His second shot echoed the final blast from the gun of his would-be killer, knocking the man over onto his side.

Garrett swung toward the street as several men came running toward the stable.

But a voice called, "Hold it, Garrett! There was only one."

Dan Wyatt's voice.

The deputy marshal came from behind a parked freight wagon, slipping his gun into its holster. "Know him, Garrett?"

"I haven't got a look at him yet."

WYATT got a lighted lantern from the hostler and, with Garrett following him, crossed to the dead man. Garrett recognized him at once as one of the Reagan crowd, the one who escaped from Grazia Plaza with Ed Reagan.

"A man named Hanks," Wyatt said. "Tough hombre."

"How'd you happen to be here?" Garrett asked the marshal.

"I've been keeping an eye on you, expecting something. Not exactly this, though. I thought Matt Reagan would send somebody a little more expert at bushwhacking."

"You still think Ed Reagan is not in Tombstone?"

"That's one thing I am sure of," Wyatt

said. "Another is that you'd better leave town pronto. You killed this man in self-defense and I can testify to that, but it could be, with Matt Reagan for your enemy, that the Quartermane crowd will decide to charge you with murder. And you'd have a sweet time wriggling out of it in this county."

Garrett eyed him frowningly, then looked at the swelling crowd. There was no real excitement in these men; nor was their curiosity too great, for already the earliest to arrive were turning away. It was just another killing, Garrett realized, and Tombstone could take that in its stride. He was willing enough to be indicted for the killing; or he would have been, if he could have counted on a fair trial. But Wyatt declared he would get no fair trial.

He said, "I'll see you, Marshal," and returned to Forsythe.

"That was the seventh man, John?"

"Yes. Let's get out of here."

They mounted and swung away from the stable, then Garrett sighted Sheriff Quartermane's bulky figure pushing through the crowd.

"Garrett!" Quartermane's voice was demanding. "Hold on there!"

Garrett ignored him and, with Forsythe beside him, turned into Third Street and left Tombstone by way of Tough Nut Street.

No one came after them.

V

THE moon was rising above the Dragoons, a dull red.

Forsythe said, "Blood on the moon." He'd brought a bottle along and every half mile or so he pulled on it. His voice was thick, his words slurred. "Seven men dead. Only one to go, eh, old man?"

John Garrett said nothing.

Forsythe drank again. "When the eighth man is dead, you'll be dead too."

"How do you figure that?"

"You're living just to kill. One more killing and you'll have nothing to live for."

"Drunk, you're a damn fool, Forsythe."

"Sober, as well. But a fool can be right."

"So you're right. After I get Ed Reagan, I'll have nothing to live for."

"'Vengeance is mine,' sayeth John Garrett, the man who plays God," said Forsythe, and laughed.

They rode on in silence for a time. Garrett smarted under Forsythe's disapproval of his seeming callousness about the deaths of those seven men. The Englishman expected him to be uneasy in conscience. But he wasn't. All he felt was that Dan was dead because of those seven and the eighth who was yet to die.

After another drink, Forsythe said, "You've got to find something to live for, my friend. Something other than the ranch you are founding here. It no longer means anything to you, so there's got to be something else." He held his bottle up to the moon to see how much it still held. "Even this," he added. "Even whisky."

"I haven't a taste for it."

"It helps a man to forget."

"It doesn't help you. Go back to your books, man."

"Tomorrow. But you, you can't even read—really read. You can find no solace in books."

"Hell!" Garrett said, his temper slipping. "Did the men who wrote those books of yours ever really live? I could tell you things you've never read."

"Perhaps. But I still say that you have got to find something for which to live. If not whisky or books, then what?" He twisted in the saddle to look at Garrett. "A woman?"

"I had a woman. I have her memory still."

"John, you're right. You know by instinct what the poets hit upon only through inspiration. The words you just spoke are poetry. 'I had a woman. I have her memory still.'

"You laughing at me?"

"I'm bloody well not. No man could find anything amusing about you. John, find yourself a woman, so you can come alive again."

"That's no better than whisky or books."

"How long since your wife passed away?"

"A dozen years."

Forsythe said, "Think about it, John," and threw the bottle away. . . .

The room grew dark, and finally Claire Maury had cried herself out and was empty

of tears. The hurt was far from eased despite her weeping, but now she must get a grip on herself and face her lonely future. The past was dead. Her love no longer lived.

She was vibrantly alive. She still would be, without her husband, and she would go on living. Widowhood would be almost unbearable, but she would not let it crush her. She rose from the bed where she had lain so long, a victim of grief, and wiped away her tears.

And wondered. What now?

She could return to Philadelphia, of course, but she needed to know more about how Ben had died—and why—to set her mind at rest. Too, she must learn if he had been properly buried. She must visit his grave.

The blow had not been as crushing as it might have been, for she had feared the worst. Even before she'd left home to search for him.

She had received no letters from him for more than three months, and until then he had been a faithful correspondent. Then abruptly, his letters had stopped coming.

SHE had not protested his leaving for Arizona. He had been an ambitious man for whom opportunity never knocked. He'd tried three different jobs in the five years of their marriage, and none had held any real promise. Then an uncle had passed away in Tucson, Arizona Territory, and Ben had been his only heir. There had been a small estate, a dry goods store in Tucson. So Ben had left for Tucson promising to send for her as soon as he was sure that his inherited business was all he hoped.

The store had not been too prosperous, but Ben's letters had been full of hope—until his last one, telling her he had sold out and was going to Tombstone where men were making fortunes and he was certain to make his. "Wait a little longer, darling."

But there'd been no further word from him. So she had finally known something was wrong, and had set out to find him.

And now she would never see him again.

A knock startled her. "Yes?" she called. "Who is it?"

"Sheriff Quartermane, Mrs. Maury."

"One moment, please."

She did not want to see him, or anyone. But she had asked him to arrange a meeting between her and the man responsible for her husband's death, so she must talk with him. She moved quickly about, lighting the lamp, freshening her face at the washstand, and fixing her hair before the mirror. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but she could do nothing about that.

She opened the door. "Come in, Sheriff."

He stood with his back to the door as he had before, a big, virile, handsome man who never looked directly at her but watched her covertly and, she imagined, stripped her with his mind's eye. She did not know if she liked the man.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Maury, but the Texan left town."

"He wouldn't talk with me?"

"I didn't get a chance to tell him you wanted to see him. He left in a hurry. One of the two men he was hunting tried to kill him. But Garrett did the killing."

"He's killed another man?" Claire shuddered. "And has got away?"

Quartermane flushed. "Such matters are handled differently here than in the East, Mrs. Maury. When a man kills in self-defense, it's hardly ever considered something for the law to bother about. A witness for Garrett said the other man fired the first shot. A witness whose word carries weight. A deputy United States marshal."

"All these killings, and with the sanction of the law officers!"

"I don't think you understand the situation here, Mrs. Maury."

"All I understand is that this John Garrett must be a madman, and that he's free to kill again. Sheriff, why did he kill my husband? I've got to know."

"I've told you, Mrs. Maury."

"You told me what Garrett told you."

"There's no reason to doubt his word."

"I have reason. I know what my husband was like."

Quartermane nodded. "Yes, of course. I will say this much—Garrett isn't likely to get away with these killings. He's made enemies, and I'd advise you to leave him to the people who can and will take care of him." For once he looked directly at her. "I don't know what your plans are, of

course, but if I can be of service to you—"

"I've given the future no thought, Sheriff."

"But you won't stay on in Tombstone?"

"I think I shall, for the time being. I want to find my husband's grave."

Quartermane looked annoyed, but said, "I'll find out where it is for you. At Garrett's camp."

Claire gave him a searching look and had a feeling that he wanted to ingratiate himself with her. Yes, of course. She was a widow. She was fair game.

SHE said, "I'd rather you wouldn't bother."

"It would be no bother."

"But it might be dangerous. He may think you are coming to arrest him and try to kill you as he's killed all those other men."

"It doesn't follow that he'll succeed."

"I won't have you run the risk. I'll go myself."

"It's a long trip through the mountains. You couldn't go alone."

"I'll hire someone to go with me."

He studied her for a moment, and decided that it would be useless to attempt to argue her out of it. "I'll have my deputy, Al Rumans, go with you," he said. "Let me know when you want to start out."

"Tomorrow morning, Sheriff."

"All right," he said, and left. . . .

Garrett took Charlie Harms and Tobe Adams with him, and they rode higher into the tawny, precipitous ramparts of the Dragoons to where five men were chopping firewood for sale in Tombstone, three of them Mexicans. Garrett hired one, Juan Acosta, to guide them to the town of Trinity in the Chiricahuas.

Acosta said, "There is nothing at Trinity, señor, but still if you want to pay me ten dollars to take you there—" He shrugged, and got his horse, a pinto pony for which he had no saddle, but rode with a horse-hair blanket.

They worked their way down from the mountains and struck out across the broad grama-grass flats of Sulphur Springs Valley. By sundown the Chiricahuas were looming high above them. Acosta led them through a gap in some rock cliffs, then pointed to a cluster of buildings far back through a canyon.

"Trinity?" Garrett asked.

"Si."

Garrett gave Acosta his ten dollars, then said, "Want to earn ten more?"

The Mexican grinned. *"Como?"*

"Ride in and find out if a man named Ed Reagan is there," Garrett said. "But don't let him catch on that you're looking for him, if he is there. Just come back and tell us."

Acosta's grin faded. "Reagan? No, I will not go!"

He wheeled his pinto and rode off fast.

Charlie Harms laughed. "You'd think Reagan was the devil himself, the way that Mex hightailed it. But you've saved ten dollars, John."

"Yeah. Let's move along."

Trinity consisted of perhaps two dozen buildings. The entrance to a mine was midway up the canyon wall behind the town, a track with a single ore car on it leading to the tunnel. Most of the shacklike buildings in town appeared to be deserted, a sign that the ore here was of a very low grade.

A second ore car, pulled by a mule and pushed by four men, emerged from the tunnel, and dumped tailings down the slope with a great racket and a huge cloud of dust. In the doorway of a combination store and saloon midway along the short street, a fat man lounged, puffing on a pipe as he watched Garrett and his companions approach. Garrett reined in facing him.

"Ed Reagan around?" the Texan asked.

"No. You're an hour too late."

"He left here an hour ago?"

"That's right. And he won't be back."

"What makes you think he won't be back?"

"He came with a wagon and loaded the girl and her stuff on it," the fat man said. "Looks to me as though he's pulled up stakes."

"Which way did he head?"

"He took the road."

"Where's it lead?"

"Galeyville."

The road led north through the canyon, and Garrett said, "Thanks," and turned along it. Old Charlie Harms pulled along-

side him.

"He could have been lying, Boss."

"We'll soon find out," Garrett said. "He can't be far ahead of us—not in a wagon on such a road as this."

THEY set out at a lope, leaving the canyon after perhaps a mile, and sighting the wagon after another quarter-hour of steady traveling. A saddled horse was tied to the rig's tailgate, however, and at the sound of riders one of the two people in the wagon dropped to the ground, untied the horse, threw himself onto it, and struck out through the brush at a run.

Garrett went after him, but knew it was useless. Reagan had a head-start and, since it was growing dark, he would be able to lose them. He rode for perhaps a half-mile through the mesquite thicket, then where it became increasingly dense and he could no longer see the fleeing man, he halted, listened intently. The only sounds he could hear were those made by Harms and Adams coming along after him. He turned back to meet them.

Harms said, "What beats me is how he knew it was us."

"He didn't," Garrett said. "He's lost his nerve, and he would have spooked no matter what riders he'd seen on his trail."

"We going to Galeyville?" Adams asked. "He may hole up there."

Garrett considered a moment, and decided that Ed Reagan wouldn't stop anywhere tonight. He'd had a scare thrown into him, and would almost certainly keep on the move. Ed Reagan wanted to live.

Garrett shook his head. "There'll be another day."

They turned back and upon reaching the road found that Reagan's companion had turned the team and was heading back toward Trinity. She reined in her horses as they came alongside the rig, stared at Garrett.

"Pig! *Tejano* dog!"

She was young, in her middle twenties, Garrett judged, a dark-skinned, heavy-bosomed woman. She wore a gold-embroidered red *rebozo* about her head, but her dress was of gingham and styled like those worn by American women. Her eyes were hot with anger. She bared her teeth at Garrett.

Charlie Harms said, "A wildcat. Watch her, Boss. She's liable to use that whip."

The whip was in her right hand, and Garrett was keeping an eye on it.

"Where were you and Reagan headed, *muchacha?*" he asked her.

"As if I would tell you, *Tejano!*"

"You may as well. You won't be going there."

"I go where I please!"

"Reagan won't be there. He's running. He'll keep running."

"He will be back. You will see!"

"So he'll come back for you, will he? That's all I want to know."

Garrett turned away, and just in time. The girl screamed at him in Spanish, cut at him with the whip. It didn't miss him entirely, but caught him a grazing blow across the back. Even so, he felt the sting of it. He rode on, thinking that she had more courage than her man.

They stopped at Trinity, where they bought some food that could be eaten without cooking, and Garrett said to the proprietor of the store-saloon:

"When Ed Reagan gets here, send me word. There'll be a hundred dollars in it for you. My camp is over in the Dragoons, and John Garrett is my name."

"You must want him bad, Garrett."

"I want him bad."

VI

CROSSING the valley, John Garrett and his two hands took it easy, so it was nearly dawn when they reached camp. Except for Eric Forsythe, the hands were bedded down and asleep. The Englishman sat by a fire, with his pipe and a book. Garrett dismounted, gave his horse to Charlie Harms, walked to the fire and filled a tin cup from the coffee pot.

"How was the hunting, John?"

"Poor."

"You know, I think your luck is no good with Ed Reagan."

"Luck? I make my own luck, friend."

"Oh? Then you'd better conjure up some now. Take a look, John."

Forsythe gestured to something beyond the light of the fire. Thirty yards or so away, somebody else was camped. A buckboard was standing across the flat, the team staked out near it. Two people were bedded down near the rig, a dozen or more feet between them.

"What's this?" Garrett asked Forsythe.

"The woman."

"What woman?"

"The woman I said you should find for yourself."

"The Dude was her husband?"

"I'm afraid so."

Garrett swore. He emptied the cup and threw it from him. . . .

The man who had brought Claire Maury to Garrett's camp was the sheriff's deputy, Al Rumans. When he came to the chuckwagon for breakfast, Garrett gave him a scowling look, and said, "What's the idea?"

Al smiled.

"Orders, Mr. Garrett."

"Quartermane's?"

NEWS TO AMUSE

By

BESS RITTER

"IF THE DEMORALIZED cuss with the number ten Stoga boots who stole the clothing off our wash line one night last week will apply at this office and produce convincing evidence that he is poorer than we are, he can take the rest of our household wardrobe gratis."

That's just one example of the kind of frank and earnest journalism which was prevalent in the 1860's way out West, and in the periodical known as the *Miner* of Silvertown, Colorado, in particular. And it didn't really matter very much whether the topic under discussion happened to be a news event, an ad, or something from the heart in the personal columns.

Once the following amusing item appeared: "Some fellow under the influence of inebriety imagined last Sunday night that he had reached his bedchamber, when the fact was that he had only got into a small outhouse in the rear of the restaurant, used for certain purposes. Here he lodged all night instead of being in the calaboose that our City Dads ought to provide."

An ad was apt to read like this one of old: "Go to Chase & Sears if you want to buy tobacco and cigars. It's a filthy weed, but if you must use it, you cannot do better than buy of them, for they always keep the best."

Personal notices were prominently displayed, often on the front page: "Notice—Frank S. Butler advertises that I have left his bed and board. This is a mistake as I own the bed and took it with me."

Garrett said, "You crazy Johnny Bull!" He hunkered down, drank coffee. "What is this, Eric?"

Forsythe smiled. "Something out of a man's choicest dreams. But you'll need all your luck with her. Her name is Claire Maury. Mrs. Ben Maury. She's a widow, old man—and you happen to be responsible for her widowhood. You gave a watch to the sheriff at Tombstone?"

Garrett nodded.

"This sheriff, Quartermane, according to what the lady told me, took it to her and asked if she could identify it. She could."

"Right the first guess."

"What's the woman want?"

"I've been wondering. Maybe she wants to shoot you. I knew a woman once who shot the hombre who killed her man. Still, I told her there was no good in coming here. The sheriff didn't like it so much either. But the lady is no joke, Garrett. She's no dancehall floss, either. Go easy on her."

"Don't tell me what to do," Garrett said and, his appetite gone, put aside his breakfast.

He saddled and rode out onto the range with the hands. There was no work for the

crew other than to keep the cattle from drifting too far across the valley, and the hands did not need Garrett's supervision. But he needed to be on the move. Too, he wanted to put off facing the woman. What could he say to the widow of a man who had died by his hand? But finally he turned back. He couldn't dodge this trouble.

She was having breakfast when he reached camp, and Al Rumans and Eric Forsythe were dancing attendance on her. He dismounted, off-saddled, and walked toward her. His first impression was merely that she was handsome.

Forsythe said, "Mrs. Maury, may I present John Garrett? John, Mrs. Maury."

Her gaze was already on Garrett, measuring and weighing him. She did not acknowledge the introduction except for a brief nod. Forsythe moved away, signaling to Rumans to come with him.

The woman put aside her plate and cup, folded her hands on her lap. She was about twenty-eight, Garrett judged, and although she appeared to be intelligent he had little hope of making her understand why it had been necessary for him to kill her husband.

SHE said abruptly, "Mr. Garrett, I don't know what to say to you."

"Nor do I know what to say to you, Mrs. Maury. Other than I'm sorry that you happened to be the wife of one of those men."

"I came to you to learn the reason for what you did."

"Sheriff Quartermane could have explained. I told him."

"He tried to explain. I didn't believe a word of it. I don't now."

"My men will tell you what happened."

"I've talked with Mr. Forsythe. That's sufficient."

"He's an honorable man. He wouldn't lie to you."

She nodded. "I'm sure of that. But I feel that he told me the truth only so far as he knows it. I knew my husband, Mr. Garrett. He also was an honorable man. I don't believe he was one of an outlaw crowd. I think you either made a mistake in his case, or had some secret reason for killing him."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"He wasn't an outlaw. He wasn't a brutal man, but a kindly man."

"He got in with bad company, Mrs. Maury."

"He was always careful in making friends. He was ambitious, and all he wanted was to get along in the world."

"In this country," Garrett said, "men try the wrong way to get along. I'll tell you what happened, and you can judge for yourself. I was trailing toward Arizona when a bunch of riders stopped my outfit and wanted to cut my herd. The leader of the group, a man named Ed Reagan, claimed that we were crossing his range and that we'd picked up some of his cattle. Trail-cutting is an old trick. I hadn't picked up any cattle, but there would have been some cattle in my herd with brands that wouldn't have been easily read. The Reagan crowd would have cut out such cattle and claimed them as their own. I refused to let them cut my herd, and they rode off. Later, when my outfit was through the mountains they stampeded the cattle and my sixteen-year-old son was killed. They had two reasons for causing the stampede. One was to hit back at me, out of spite. The other was that scattered cattle are more easily stolen."

She said, "Perhaps you *had* picked up cattle belonging to the men my husband was with."

"I'm honest, Mrs. Maury."

"It's something I intend to mention to the sheriff."

"Well," Garrett said, "if you won't take my word, there's no use my talking."

"I haven't refused to listen."

"If you're willing to hear me out—well, the man who turned out to be your husband struck me as being different from the others. A tenderfoot. When the others rode on after I refused to let them cut my herd, this man lingered. I told him he was keeping the wrong kind of company. I warned him to quit the bunch if they planned trouble for me. To my mind, they were outlaws. It's too bad Ben Maury stayed with them."

"There was no reason for my husband to be involved with outlaws," the woman said. "Therefore, they weren't outlaws."

"You said he was ambitious."

"He wouldn't have turned to crime, Mr. Garrett."

"Not even if he was hard up?"

"He wasn't hard up. He owned a store in Tucson and had just sold it before going to Tombstone. He had several thousand dollars, at least."

"You saw the money?"

"Hardly. I hadn't even heard from him in three months. That's why I came to Arizona."

"Then you can't know if he still had the money or was broke," Garrett said. "He may have lost the money. Through a bad investment. Or gambling."

Her voice sharpened. "You think of everything, don't you? Everything that will make my husband appear a blackguard." She rose and faced him. "If they were outlaws, why didn't you go to the authorities? Why did you take the law into your own hands?"

Anger, instead of robbing her of some of her attractiveness, only made her face come alive and her eyes to flash. She was a beautiful woman. He felt a quickening of his pulse. How had she even happened to be the wife of a damn fool like the Dude?

IN ALL the years since Ellen's passing away, Garrett had never looked upon another woman with desire. But with this woman, this widow of the man he had killed, it was different. With a sense of shock he realized that desire had not been dead, but merely dormant within him. And Claire Maury was unwittingly fanning the embers.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Garrett. Why did you take the law into your hands?"

"This is a lawless country, Mrs. Maury."

"And you help to make it that, do you not?"

"I don't see the matter in the same light as you do."

"Where is my husband buried?"

He looked at her, shocked.

"I want to visit his grave," she said. "Please have the decency to tell me where my husband is buried."

He could not speak.

She stared. "It can't be. You couldn't have been so unfeeling that you failed to give him a proper burial!" Her voice rose, with hysteria in it. "What kind of a man are you? Are you human?"

Forsythe came back and touched her arm.

"Don't torture yourself like this, Mrs. Maury." His voice was gentle. "For your own sake. A horrible thing has happened, but the worst thing we can do is to dwell upon it. Please—"

"I want to know where my husband's body was left! I demand to know."

Forsythe looked helplessly at Garrett. "John?"

Garrett sighed. "There is a settlement over near Stein's Pass, Mrs. Maury. Grazia Plaza. West of the place there is an arroyo running north and south. A few miles beyond the arroyo is a cluster of rocks. I left your husband's body there."

As she looked at him it seemed that he could feel her hatred. Then she turned and went to the buckboard, Al Rumans hurrying to join her. The deputy quickly harnessed the horses, and in a few minutes they were driving away. Garrett looked after them, his face bleak.

Forsythe said, "What now, John?"

Garrett shook his head. "Nothing. This is the end of it."

"She'll make trouble. She said she would tell the authorities she believes the whole thing happened because you had picked up some cattle belonging to those men. She could show Quartermane a way to get you."

"Well, let her. There's nothing I can do to stop her."

"There's a way. Ed Reagan."

"What about Reagan?"

"Take him alive," Forsythe said. "Offer him his life for making a statement of what Ben Maury really was—for Mrs. Maury."

"No, I won't go for that."

"Because it's more important to kill Ed Reagan than to avoid trouble she may cause?"

"Not that," Garrett said. "The way it stands, she'll go on thinking her husband was a decent sort. She'll believe in him. I'm not going to destroy what little she has left of him."

"So you have a heart, after all," Forsythe said, marveling. "And it took a woman to make a living human being of you again."

Garrett was wondering if he would be able to forget Claire Maury, whether or not

she made trouble. He knew he wouldn't.

VII

NO LONGER a manhunter but a cattleman again, John Garrett, during that summer of '81, bought and sold cattle on a scale he had never dreamed possible. A Texan never had markets for beef so close at hand. Meeting the demand for cattle became a problem.

Buyers came from Tombstone. He was awarded contracts for supplying beef to the San Carlos Apache reservation and to the construction camps of the railroad being built between Benson and Nogales. He made frequent trips into Mexico to buy cattle. By late July, he had enough cash to return to Texas where he bought a thousand yearling and two-year-old steers and fifteen hundred mixed cattle and had them thrown into one herd.

He hired a friend, an experienced trail-driver, to take the herd to Arizona. In Fort Worth he obtained a loan from the Stockmen's Bank to buy more cattle. He hired another trail driver to take this herd to Arizona.

He returned to the Territory by the Southern Pacific Railroad, which now had built through to Benson, and from Benson traveled to Tombstone by stagecoach. He wasted no time in the mining town but got a horse at the OK Corral and struck out for his cow camp east of the Dragoons.

Late in the summer he made another trip to Mexico, returning with three thousand head of Sonoran cattle. But only to discover that three herds belonging to other outfits had crowded onto the range he had come to look upon as his own. Word had spread in Texas that Arizona was "a cowman's paradise with only grass, game and outlaws there."

Garrett saw the handwriting on the wall. Texans would come in a floodtide and the Territory would become crowded. There would be disputes over the range. It would be better to solve the problem before it became one than to wait until he might have to use a gun to hold graze for his stock.

He had heard about the San Alejandro Valley which was owned by a family named Monteros under an old Mexican land grant. The surviving members no longer lived on the grant. Garrett went to see Juan Monteros, now a lawyer in Tucson, and leased the grant of nearly thirty thousand hectares for a ten-year period at ten cents per acre a year, with an option to buy the land within the ten years.

Early in 1882, Garrett moved onto that range that need not be shared. The influx of Texas outfits was now in full swing, and ranches were being founded by men from Kansas, Colorado, and elsewhere.

The buildings that once housed the Monteros family and their retainers were now but crumbling adobe ruins, and again Garrett's headquarters was a camp. He considered putting up buildings, but was too busy handling cattle to do any real planning until Eric Forsythe suggested that it was time they stopped living like Indians.

The Englishman stayed with the outfit for no understandable reason. He was a tutor, but no one in the crew would submit to tutoring. Garrett assumed that Forsythe stayed simply because he had no better place to go. Now, considering the man's suggestion, Garrett agreed. It was time he and his men stopped living like Indians.

"All right," he said. "You do the building."

"But I'm no architect, you know."

"You are now."

And that same day Garrett put a herd of seven hundred steers on the trail to the San Carlos Indian Agency.

DEPUTY U. S. Marshal Dan Wyatt rode into the trail camp one night, traveling with a spare horse under light pack. He was not as dapper as when Garrett had met him in Tombstone. After supper Wyatt sat by the fire with Garrett.

"You don't get to Tombstone often, Garrett?"

"I've been there only once since the night I had the gunfight with Hanks."

"Still, I've been hearing a lot about you."

"Such as?"

"That you've acquired the San Alejandro grant."

"That's where I'm going to put down my roots," Garrett told him. "How are things

with you?"

"So-so. I'm after a couple of road agents who held up the Tombstone-Benson stage and took a couple of mail pouches along with the express company's strong-box. That makes it Government business."

"Think you'll catch them?"

Wyatt shrugged. "I wouldn't bet on it. The outlaws are playing it smart. Organizing, helping each other. The trouble is, the lawless element has political influence."

"You mean Quartermane is in cahoots with them?"

"I can't say the sheriff goes that far, but he's friendly with Matt Reagan who supports him on one hand and on the other plays the outlaws' game. Undercover, of course. But the situation is getting out of hand and the time could come when the outlaw crowd will rule the roost in Cochise County." Wyatt paused, lighted a Mexican cigar, then asked, "Have you had any rustler trouble?"

"Not yet."

"Some of the other cattlemen are complaining to Quartermane. Rustling is the county authorities' concern, not that of Federal officers. And Quartermane hasn't brought in any rustlers." He gave Garrett a curious look. "It's odd that they haven't bothered you."

"Maybe they've heard what happened to the Reagan crowd."

"Yes. But it's surprising that orders haven't come from Matt Reagan to give your outfit some attention."

"He knows that if he gives such orders I'll come gunning for him."

"He doesn't scare, Garrett."

"Ed did. Ed ran from me twice."

Wyatt was silent a moment, puffing on his cigar. "I heard about Ed running. He's in Mexico now—operates back and forth across the Border in the dark of the moon. I've heard he's doing some smuggling. You threw a scare into him, all right. But Matt is another matter. Don't think for a minute he's forgot you killed his younger brother. Besides, if he should forget, the woman will remind him of it."

"The Maury woman?"

"Who else?"

Garrett frowned. He had taken it for granted she had gone back East. He had tried to put her out of his mind, though there'd been times when she was etched all too clearly in his memory. He'd seen her but once, but he'd found her desirable, and ever since he'd been aware that there were still male hungers in him.

Garrett looked back at Wyatt. "So she's still in Tombstone?"

"And friendly with Matt Reagan," Wyatt said. "No more, as yet, though you can bet plenty Matt would like it to be more. She's a damned attractive woman."

"I've seen her," Garrett said. "Get on with what you were saying, Dan."

Wyatt's cigar had gone out, and he lighted it with a bit of burning brush from the fire. "I try to keep tabs on what goes on in the Tombstone district. It's my bailiwick. I have a line into Quartermane's office. Not a good one, but—well, you know Al Rumans. He told me about Mrs. Maury's visit to you. He took her to Grazia Plaza and they found Ben Maury's grave. Some Mexicans had buried him. She had a cairn raised to mark it.

"She's already fed Quartermane the idea that your fight with the Reagan crowd and her husband had been your fault, that you had picked up some cattle belonging to them. Quartermane let her believe that was possible, but he knew better, knowing the Reagans. When he did nothing, Mrs. Maury went to Prescott and laid the matter before the Governor."

GARRETT murmured, "She's a game one."

"Yeah. She knows how to hate."

"What happened at Prescott?"

"The Governor was polite, and promised to investigate but—Well, Prescott and the Territorial Government might as well be as far away as the moon for all the control the people there have over affairs here in Cochise. So she came back to Tombstone. And it's my idea she's playing a waiting game."

"To even the score with me, eh?"

"She's learned the ropes, John. She's found out that Matt Reagan holds a grudge against you and that sooner or later he'll try to work it off. She wants to be in on it.

That's how I see it, anyway."

"Maybe you're seeing what's not there," Garrett said. "It could be she's interested in Matt for himself."

"I tell you they're no more than friendly."

"You can't be just friendly with a woman like that. You couldn't stand it."

Wyatt laughed. "But she's as friendly with Jess Quartermane as she is with Reagan, and a couple of bucks like that wouldn't share a woman. One would run the other off—or try to, and there'd be shooting when the try was made. Besides, if she was Reagan's woman, she'd be living in style. And she's not."

"How is she living?"

"Earning it by helping out at Mrs. MacGregor's boarding-house on Third Street."

"A hell of a way for a woman like her to earn a living."

"Yeah. When she could have her pick of most any man in Tombstone."

"Damn it all," Garrett said, "why doesn't she go back East where she belongs?"

Dan Wyatt threw his cigar into the fire and stood up. "I've been telling you why," he said. "She's after your scalp. Well, I've got to be moseying along. See you again soon, I hope."

"Yeah," said Garrett. "So long."

He sat by the fire long after Wyatt had ridden out, even after it began to rain, thinking of a woman. . . .

It was nearly nine o'clock when Claire Maury, tired to the core, finished in the kitchen and left the boarding house. There had been fourteen men at the table tonight, and the chore of dishwashing had seemed endless. There must be an easier way of keeping alive, she thought, drawing her shawl about her shoulders. There was—if only she had the courage to take it. She told herself, I have the courage!

She was pleased to find Jess Quartermane waiting for her.

It was not far to the little house farther along Third Street which she rented, but it began to rain as they moved away from the boarding-house. Quartermane took her arm to hurry her, but she held back.

"I don't mind getting a little wet, Jess. Not tonight."

"Something special about tonight?"

"Why—yes. Yes, there is. I've made up my mind about Matt's offer."

She knew by his silence that he was displeased. They had almost reached her house before he said, "It's not for you. Matt was a damn fool to suggest such a thing."

"I'm sick of cooking and waiting on table and washing dishes," Claire said. "And what else is there for a woman in this town?"

Quartermane knew as well as she did there were few ways in which a respectable woman could earn a living in Tombstone, and none any more dignified than what she was now doing. Perhaps when the town became a community of homes and families, there would be more suitable employment, but now there was no way for a woman to earn money and still maintain respectability.

There was marriage, of course, but Claire refused to consider that. There were men who would make things easier for her, men like Jess Quartermane and Matt Reagan, but she shrank from the idea. Matt's offer was something other than that, and while it was far from being respectable, tonight it seemed attractive. And Quartermane's disapproval was not going to change her mind.

THEY halted before her house, and she was aware that he was annoyed, perhaps angry with her. She did not want to quarrel with him. She would need Jess Quartermane. There was a chance she could use him against John Garrett, and he also would serve as a counter-balance against Matt Reagan who would certainly, once she accepted his offer, be difficult to hold at arm's length. She had no illusions about Reagan. He wanted her, and his offer was merely a part of his campaign to wear down her defenses.

She touched Quartermane's arm. "Come in a little while."

He was surprised, for never before had he got farther than her door. He followed her inside, closed the door, stood by it while she struck a match and lighted a lamp on a table in the center of her poorly furnished parlor.

She took his hat, told him to sit down. She went to her bedroom and when she returned,

she had changed her clothes, fixed her hair, and no longer looked so tired. She put a deck of cards and a deal box on the table.

She smiled. "All right, Jess," she said. "Show me how to be a faro dealer."

VII

RIDING steadily through the rainy dark, by midnight, when John Garrett reached Tombstone, he'd covered a good twenty miles. He considered himself a damn fool. The woman would be abed, and if she weren't she wouldn't listen to anything he had to say. He did not know what he wanted to say to her, anyway.

As he slowed his blowing horse to a walk, the suspicion came to him that he merely wanted to see her again. It was too bad that Dan Wyatt had stopped at his camp and talked of her.

Turning off Allen Street into Third, Garrett had no difficulty finding Mrs. McGregor's boarding-house. There was a small sign in one of the windows:

ROOMS & MEALS

A lamp just inside cast a pale yellow glow into the dark street. But a lamp left burning did not mean that anyone was awake in the house, Garrett reflected. More likely it was lighted for the convenience of some late-prowling roomer. He was hesitating about dismounting and knocking when a man, coming through the rain from Allen Street, turned toward the house.

Garrett called to him, "Friend, there's a Mrs. Maury works here. You know her?"

The man faced Garrett, a bewhiskered man wearing a miner's cap and red shirt. "I know her. What about it?"

"I've got to locate her tonight. It's important. Where does she live?"

The miner pointed along the street. "In one of those houses, bucko."

Garrett said, "Thanks," and turned his horse away.

All of the shacklike houses in the row were dark but one. He reined in, sat his horse with the rain now a heavy downpour, then he threw off his indecision, dismounted, and knocked.

After a few seconds a voice asked, "Who's there?"

Hers. He remembered it clearly.

"John Garrett. I'd like to talk with you, Mrs. Maury."

A key grated in the lock and the door swung open. She wore a pale green wrapper over her nightgown. Her hair lay in heavy, dull gold waves over her shoulders. She stared at him in wide-eyed wonder, then gestured for him to enter. She moved back beside the table as he stepped inside and closed the door.

He removed his hat, water dripping from it and his slicker onto the floor. She was looking at him as she had that day at his camp, her eyes full of hatred.

"Well, Mr. Garrett? What is it you want here?"

"I—well, I thought there might be something I could do for you."

"Really? And what gave you that thought after all this time?"

"Until tonight I'd thought you had gone back East."

"Oh? And how did you learn I hadn't?"

"A man from Tombstone stopped by my camp tonight and mentioned that you were still here."

"So you decided to come to see if there was something you could do for me? How gallant, Mr. Garrett!"

He frowned, standing there in an agony of embarrassment.

She said, "Were you told that I was destitute?"

He shrugged. "I know it's not easy for a woman alone in this country. I don't think Tombstone is the proper place for a woman like you. If you'll let me, I'll help you get home. You can call it a loan, if you like, and pay me back when you're able."

"Are you afraid of me, Mr. Garrett? Afraid I may find a way to have justice done for my husband's murder."

"I didn't come here to quarrel with you, Mrs. Maury."

"Then we won't quarrel," she said. "But I'd like you to understand how it really is with me. I had money enough to return East, but I stayed on because I'm convinced that sooner or later I'll find a way to prove

that you killed my husband and those other men for a reason other than the one you claim. I hope to prove to the whole world that you deliberately murdered them!"

"If it was murder, I wouldn't be able to face you, Mrs. Maury," Garrett said. "And it's not fear that made me want to help you. I wish you'd believe that, at least."

SHE regarded him frowningly. "If you're not afraid of me, what makes you so anxious to help me? A guilty conscience? Or something else?"

"I'll be truthful. I've not been able to forget you."

"Indeed? I should be flattered, shouldn't I?"

Garrett was unable to look at her. The frightening thought came that he was in love with this woman whose husband he had killed.

She shook her head. "I'm not flattered. But I admit some satisfaction. I hope the thought of me keeps you awake nights. I hope you're never free of it by day. I want you to suffer as much as I've been grieving. And you will suffer, if you get to want me enough—for I wouldn't give myself to you if I were dying for want of a man! And one thing more—I wouldn't accept your charity if I were starving!"

Garrett said, "It was a mistake, my coming here," and turned to leave.

She said, "Just a moment," and gestured toward a deck of cards and a deal box on the table. "I'm not destitute, Mr. Garrett. In fact, I'm about to embark on a new career—as a faro dealer in Matt Reagan's Alhambra. I'm told that it will be very profitable. So when you lie awake nights thinking about me, do think of me as the sort of woman I really am, won't you?"

He went out then, hearing her laughter as he closed the door.

He mounted and rode from Tombstone, his mood as bleak as the night. . . .

It was as though she'd woven a spell about him, or put a curse on him. His mind kept conjuring up the picture of her on the trail, and at night, lying in his blankets, he visualized her as she had been when he entered her house—infinitely desirable—and his wanting her was an ache in the core of him. She had hoped that thoughts of her would keep him awake nights. She had seemed to know how tormented he *would* be.

He delivered his cattle to the Indian Agency and turned back with his men and his money. He determined not to stop in Tombstone, but his resolve shattered when they neared the town. That night, after chuck, Garrett saddled a mount and rode away.

The little house on Third Street was dark, and no one came to the door when he knocked. He rode around to the Alhambra, dismounted, and tied his horse to the hitch-rack, his awareness that this was foolhardy brushed aside by his aching need to see her.

He entered the place, telling himself that she wouldn't be here, that women like her didn't seek employment in even so gaudy a deadfall as Matt Reagan's Alhambra. Yet he knew he *would* find her, and so it was no surprise when he entered the gambling room at the rear and saw her there.

The back room was as crowded as the barroom, and he joined the men at the roulette wheel without giving his attention to the betting against the wheel. He watched Claire Maury at the faro layout beyond the dice table. She did not lack bettors and, Garrett reflected, with the anger of sudden jealousy, it was she herself as much as her deal box that attracted them. She was the come-on, the bait, the honey in the trap.

She was wearing a wine-red velvet dress cut far too low, and so form-fitting that her breasts were outlined in all their curving fullness. There was a black velvet choker about her throat, and her only jewelry was an enormous cameo brooch—and her wedding band. Her hair had the soft sheen of gold in the lamplight, and her eyes were jewel bright.

Her laughter reached Garrett even above the noise of the room. It was low in her throat, with a sort of abandoned quality. She had learned fast.

She must have felt his gaze, for she looked up and her laughter ended as she met his eyes. She was blank-faced for a moment, then gave him a mocking smile. He walked

toward her.

She said, too loudly, "Now here comes a gambling man. Welcome, Mr. Garrett. Do you feel lucky tonight?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

"Only money talks here. Or are you a cheap skate, Mr. Garrett?"

Loud laughter came from the men about the table.

GARRETT took out his wallet, threw a hundred dollars down in front of her. "I'll buy five minutes of your time," he said.

She reached for the money, laughing. "Gentlemen, our friend has proved himself no cheap skate. This table is closed temporarily." As the men drifted away, she motioned to a waiter. "Charlie, I'm buying my visitor a drink. Bring him whatever a cattleman drinks—and champagne for me."

When the waiter was gone, she smiled mockingly at Garrett.

"Does that scowl mean you're displeased with me, my dear Garrett?"

"This doesn't become you, Mrs. Maury."

"Not 'Mrs. Maury,'" she said. "I've a new name. I'm called 'Cameo' now. Because of this." She touched her brooch. "It's rather a nice name, don't you think? And having it bestowed upon me by the customers proves that the surroundings do become me." She counted the bills he had thrown on the table. "A hundred dollars. You pay well, Garrett. Perhaps I should cultivate you."

The waiter returned, set a shot glass of whisky on the table for Garrett and a stemmed wine glass holding champagne before Claire. She tossed the hundred dollars onto the waiter's tray.

"Keep the change, Charlie." She laughed at Garrett's frown, and picked up her glass. "You can't buy me, Garrett. But you have got yourself a drink and five minutes. Enjoy both."

"I think you're deceiving yourself, Mrs. Maury."

"Really?"

"You're not happy doing this. You can't enjoy making a spectacle of yourself."

"You're wrong," she said. "I enjoy being the center of attraction. Are you by any chance jealous?"

His face was rocky. "If it's any satisfaction to you, it's worked out the way you wanted. I can't get you out of my thoughts. I had to see you again. Now that I've been honest with you, why not be honest with me—or with yourself? Admit that this is no place for you, and leave it."

"And go back to working in a boardinghouse? No, thanks."

"I could arrange something for you."

She sipped champagne, watching him over the rim of the glass. "I keep getting so many offers I can't choose between them. But I gave you an answer the last time I saw you. I thought I'd made it clear enough." She no longer found the situation amusing. Her smile faded, her eyes chilled. "Garrett, I hated the sight of you that night. I feel no different now—and I'll feel no different tomorrow or next year or ten years from now. I think you'd better go."

Matt Reagan came and stood beside her. "Something wrong, Cameo?"

"Not a thing. Garrett is just leaving."

Reagan's heavy, florid face was ugly with poorly controlled anger. "Garrett," he said, "I thought you'd understand it without my saying it. You're not welcome in the Alhambra. Get out and stay out."

Garrett ignored him, but turned away, silently cursing himself for having come to the place. He'd never before made a fool of himself over a woman.

IX

ALTHOUGH it was not possible for Garrett to put Claire Maury out of his thoughts entirely, with the passing of time and the shaping of events, her image was crowded into a far corner of his mind. Arizona was changing, and the change was most pronounced in Cochise County. The Apaches still raided, but their raids were now on the more isolated ranches and smaller settlements—and they were the Army's business.

Tombstone continued to boom, with no let-up in the fabulous outpouring of wealth from its mines; and cattle ranches sprang up until, to a cattleman's mind, the range

became crowded.

But outlawry became the real leading industry of Cochise County. As the *Arizona Weekly Citizen* reported:

> Officers in Tombstone will not or cannot arrest and there is a reign of terror there. Jails will not hold their inmates, and jurors dare not convict. Stage lines, express companies, ranchmen and miners are forced to purchase immunity from robbery.

In far-off Washington, the President of the United States issued a proclamation which stated in part:

> —in consequence of unlawful combinations of evil-disposed persons who are banded together to oppose and obstruct the execution of the laws, it has become impractical to enforce by the ordinary judicial proceedings the laws of the United States within that Territory—

President Arthur warned all such "evil-disposed persons" to disperse, and ordered the military authorities in Arizona to deal with the outlaws.

The Tombstone newspapers, especially one desiring to alibi the lawless element, took to calling the outlaws "cowboys." Many outlaws *were* cowhands turned bad, their first misstep being rustling. John Garrett had lost to outlawry several of the hands who had come from Texas with him.

Cattlemen prospered, but they were finding Arizona no cowman's paradise—not with organized rustling going on on such a large scale that not even vigilante action could cope with it. Garrett was asked by other ranchers to join their vigilante organization, but refused. He believed that vigilante action, in its own way, was as much an evil as rustling.

His San Alejandro Ranch, which had not yet been molested, was isolated, hemmed in by mountain ranges, guarded by alert riders who would shoot to kill. On two occasions Apaches raided the ranch, and Garrett took to the trail with his men and taught the Indians a costly lesson. Rustlers were less bold, but Garrett knew they were only biding their time. Grapevine information was that Ed Reagan had come out of hiding and was, if not the leader of the rustlers, high in their ranks. Sooner or later Ed Reagan would turn his attention to the San Alejandro Ranch—for profit and revenge.

Eric Forsythe had put a half hundred Mexicans to work, and ranch headquarters buildings of adobe—a huge barn, blacksmith shop, cookhouse, two bunkhouses, a ranch house—were finally completed. Furniture that Forsythe ordered for the big house was brought from the railroad by freight wagons.

When the house was finally furnished to the Englishman's satisfaction, he told Garrett, "Fit for a cattle king. All it needs now is a woman."

Garrett said, "Yes, a woman," and thought of Claire Maury, but continued to bunk with the crew and eat in the cookshack.

Three months after ranch headquarters was completed Garrett returned from a cattle-buying trip to learn that rustlers had raided the ranch.

His segundo, Pete Sarbo, said, "We cut their sign yesterday morning, Boss. They took eighty head of cattle. I followed the trail for about thirty miles, but it was cold."

"How cold?"

"Two, three days."

"Where'd you cut their sign?"

"One of the hands, Tom Eberts, saw tracks across a sandy flat at the north end of the range. I rode up there and saw the tracks of five shod horses and about eighty cows. We tried to follow the trail but it petered out."

Garrett said, "If they get away with this, they'll try it again. Pete, I'm going hunting."

HE PICKED four men to go with him, one old Charlie Harms who was good at tracking. Eric Forsythe volunteered to accompany them, so Garrett said, "Come along. But it's apt to be riskier business than bossing a bunch of peons making 'dobe bricks."

They saddled up, packed a spare horse with camp gear and provisions, and headed north through the valley. Garrett's hunch was that the rustlers had headed for Galeyville, a notorious outlaw hangout, and when at sundown they stopped at a ranch owned by a man named Ives, Garrett became certain his hunch was right. Questioned about strange riders driving a small bunch of cattle, Ives nodded.

"Two nights ago," he said. "Something

woke me about midnight. I pulled on my pants and boots, got my Winchester, went outside. I could hear cattle bawling and riders yelping, then I saw them top that rise to the south, traveling fast. They circled my buildings, then headed north again. I didn't mess with them."

"Five riders and about eighty head of cattle?"

"About that, I figure."

Garrett asked, "Would you say they were headed towards Galeyville?"

"I'd bet on it," Ives said. "That's where the rustler crowd hangs out."

Garrett said, "Thanks for the information," and rode on with his men.

They covered another dozen miles by nightfall, then went into camp by a shallow creek in rough country. In the morning, Charlie Harms scouted for a trail into the mountains while the others were at breakfast. When they overtook him at midmorning he was waiting at the entrance to a canyon.

"They went through here, John," the old cowhand said. "Camped about halfway through the canyon and butchered one of our steers—for enough meat for a meal. The coyotes and buzzards got the rest."

"How long since they passed here, Charlie?"

"Yesterday late, I'd say."

"Then we should catch up with them before they reach Galeyville."

"Let's get moving," said Harms.

The trail was easily followed here in the mountains, for the rustlers were forced to keep the terrain that cattle could travel. Late in the afternoon, Garrett and his men came upon the ashes of a fire and Charlie Harms, down off his horse, said, "Still warm." He kicked at a bacon rind. "They didn't eat our beef this time."

Going on, they followed the tracks of cattle and riders through a cut in towering cliffs and saw a boulder-strewn valley beyond. The trail led across the valley, and rocks finally gave way to mesquite thickets while beyond the brush was a gap in more cliffs.

Garrett recognized the terrain here. The half-deserted mining town of Trinity was in a canyon beyond the cliffs, and it was there that he had once come searching for Ed Reagan. He lifted his horse to a lope, certain now that the rustlers hadn't got farther than Trinity, and shortly led his riders through the gap into the canyon in which the grubby town was located.

Cattle were scattered across a barren flat midway between the cliffs and the town. There were no riders with the cattle.

Forsythe swung his horse close to Garrett's. "Your cattle, John?"

Garrett could make out his JG Connected brand on several of the nearer animals. He nodded. "I want the thieves as well as the cattle," he said. "Come on. We'll get out of sight."

He led the way to a brush-fringed hollow where they dismounted and watched for riders coming from the town a quarter of a mile away. It was hazy dusk when they came, not five riders but four, with a spare horse under pack. They began bunching the cattle.

Garrett and his men took them by complete surprise as they rode from the hollow with drawn guns. The first rustler to see them shouted a warning and grabbed for his gun, firing the instant it cleared its holster. The slug missed Garrett by a scant margin. He beaded the man, but old Charlie Harms got in the shot. The rustler toppled from saddle, sprawled motionless on the ground. Forsythe swung around behind the other three, his English hunting rifle leveled, and Garrett rode in on them. The rustlers, one a Mexican, lifted their hands.

The Mexican said, "*Por Dios!* Do not shoot, hombres!"

"Shoot?" Garrett said. "Hell, I'd rather hang you! Charlie, get their guns."

HARMS collected three six-shooters and two saddleguns.

Garrett said, "Who's the leader here?" When only sullen stares answered him he aimed his revolver at the Mexican and cocked it. "You! Talk up."

Before the Mexican could reply, one of the others said, "We're partners, Garrett. None of us is boss."

Garrett eased his gun off cock, holstered it. "So you know me, do you? Maybe you

know I have a reputation for the way I deal with your kind."

The man who had spoken, a lanky man with a swarthy complexion, looked as scared as the Mexican now. "I heard what you did to the Reagan crowd, Garrett," he said. "But that bunch killed your son. All we did was run off a few of your cattle."

"Tell him, Jack," the Mexican said. "Tell Señor Garrett!"

"Tell me what?"

The lanky Jack shrugged. "Ed Reagan. He put us to it."

"He did, eh? Where's Ed now?"

"He was over at Galeyville when we left there." Jack's voice had taken on a whining tone. "We were broke. We asked Ed if he didn't have jobs for us. He told us that if we got some of your cattle, he'd see that we got a good price for them. He grubstaked us and—"

Garrett cut in, "We'll go to Galeyville."

With their prisoners, the men from the San Alejandro Ranch rode toward Trinity. Two riders had entered the town from the Galeyville road and were dismounting before the combination store and saloon when Garrett's group arrived. Garrett recognized Sheriff Jess Quartermane and his deputy, Al Rumans. He swung over to the lawmen, reined in. They looked at him with surprise.

Quartermane said, "Off your range some, ain't you, Garrett?"

"For reason," Garrett told him. "Some of my cattle drifted up this way—with the help of these three men and another who's lying dead back through the canyon."

"So? What do you intend to do with them?"

"Would it do any good to turn them over to the law?"

Quartermane didn't like the question, and showed it with a frown that darkened his handsome face. "If you want to prefer charges and testify against them in court, it'll do a lot of good," he said sharply. "Don't put all the blame for this rustling on the law, Garrett. I can make arrests, but that does mighty little good when the men who make the charges lose their nerve and fail to make them stick."

"I never lose my nerve, Sheriff."

"All right. I'll take 'em in. You come to Tombstone and sign the complaint."

"I'll do that. And I'll appear in court against them. But there's something more. Ed Reagan planned the job. They met him over at Galeyville, and they were to meet him there when they got back with my cattle. I'm on my way there now."

"A waste of time," Quartermane said. "Al and I just came from there. Reagan's not in Galeyville." He took out and lighted a cigar, looking at the three rustlers. "Al, one of them isn't our man, is he?"

Rumans shook his head. "But one of them is Jack Larue, and that's getting right close." The deputy looked at Garrett. "We're after a hombre named Burnett. For murder. What's the name of the feller lying dead back through the canyon?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Jack is it your pardner, Burnett?"

Lanky Jack Larue had his nerve back now that he no longer was in danger of hanging. He spat, and said, "Go find out for yourself, badge-toter."

Rumans laughed, "I'll do that." He got back on his horse. "Just where did you leave that dead man, Garrett?"

Garrett looked at Charlie Harms. "Show him, eh, Charlie?"

Harms rode out with the deputy, and the others waited without talking. John Garrett could sense the sheriff's hostility, and wondered why Quartermane's feelings should be so intense. He supposed that the man had taken a dislike to him the day he'd reported having wiped out most of Ed Reagan's old crowd and turned in the Dude's watch.

THE few inhabitants of Trinity were watching them. The fat proprietor of the store-saloon and two other men were at the door of the building. Faces showed at the doors or windows of a half-dozen houses. And one of the faces was that of the Mexican girl he'd encountered on his last visit out this way. Maria Something-or-other. Ed Reagan's woman. Garrett marked her house. He would have a talk with her.

When Harms and Rumans returned, the deputy was leading the dead man's horse

with the body tied across the saddle. He said, "It's Burnett, Sheriff."

Quartermane mounted. He said, "You'll come to Tombstone and sign a complaint against these three, Garrett?"

"I'll be in Tombstone tomorrow."

Quartermane turned away, taking the three rustlers with him, with Al Rumans, towing the horse carrying the body, following. They disappeared through the darkness.

Charlie Harms said, "Wouldn't surprise me none if those three get away before Quartermane gets halfway to Tombstone."

Garrett shook his head. "He'll take them in. He won't let me get anything on him. Sheriff Jess Quartermane is no fool, Charlie." He handed some money to Eric Forsythe. "Take the boys inside and set up the drinks. I've got something to take care of."

When the five men entered the saloon, he angled across the street toward the small adobe house where he'd seen the girl, Maria.

She called, "Come in," to his knock.

He opened the door and stepped into a candlelighted room as untidy and sparsely furnished as a room could be. The girl stood beside a plank table on which were two flickering candles and some dirty dishes. There was a fireplace at one side of the room, and a rumpled bed at the other. The girl stood motionless, her hands at her sides. Her face was in shadow, but her eyes gleamed with hatred for him—like cat's eyes in the dark. She was feline in the way she hissed at him.

"Tejano! Tejano dog!"

Garrett half-smiled, removed his hat. "You remember me?"

"I remember you! I spit on you!"

"What's the trouble? Didn't Ed come back? He could have sent for you."

"He will, once he has killed you, *Tejano!*"

Garrett closed the door, stood with his back to it. "He was in Galeyville not long ago. He could have come to see you then. I wasn't around."

"What are you trying to do? Say that he doesn't want me?"

Garrett wondered why he was baiting her when it was obvious she had no knowledge of Ed Reagan's whereabouts. He looked at the coarse, half-wild beauty of her. He shook his head.

"No, I won't say that. He'd want you, all right."

That infuriated her all the more. She leaped at him suddenly, screaming something in Spanish, and her right hand swung up with the knife she'd had concealed in the folds of her skirt. The blade glinted in the candlelight as it drove at his throat.

Garrett dodged, and the blade ripped his corduroy coat. She drew it back, to slice at his midriff. He got hold of her wrist with his left hand, twisted. She shrieked, dropped the knife, but her free hand lashed at him, the nails clawing at his face.

He got hold of that hand, too, but she brought a knee up at his groin. He twisted, took the knee on his thigh. She maneuvered somehow to sink her teeth into his right wrist, and pain forced him to release her. She bent to pick up the knife, but he kicked it across the floor. She came erect, staring wildly, her bosom rising and falling with her labored breathing.

Again she leaped at him, both hands claw-

[*Turn page*]

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ing. But it was only a feint, and she whirled as he backed away and went for the knife. Garrett grabbed, caught her blouse. It ripped and came away in his hand, baring her to the skirt.

As she got the knife and came at him, sudden fear made him strike her. The flat of his hand caught her alongside the face, knocking her one way and the knife the other. She crumpled by the side of the bed, and stayed there, gasping for breath, and with her eyes gleaming wickedly.

HE THREW the knife into the fireplace, then faced her with the width of the room between them. He'd never fought a woman before, and he felt like a fool. He had dropped his hat, picked it up, then looked at her again. She was not trying to cover her nakedness.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Cabron! Tejano cabron!"

He opened the door, but halted when she said, "Wait!" Without looking around, he said, "What do you want?"

"Look at me, *Tejano!*"

He obeyed, and saw her slipping her skirt down over her hips. She let it fall to the floor, stepped out of it and kicked it from her. She stepped out of her sandals.

He closed the door, stared, said, "What's this?"

His pulse began to race as he realized with a sharp awareness that she was beautiful from head to foot. Her skin had a coppery gleam in the pale light. She was well-formed, strongly built, and there was a great outward thrust to her bell-shaped breasts. She was small at the waist, curving broadly at the hips.

She held her head high and her shoulders back, arched her back, revealing herself so that he need not wonder about any part of her. His gaze touched the breasts, the deep-shadowed pelvic swelling. She was beautiful, yes. But as a wildcat is beautiful.

She said, "Well, are you a man or not?" Her voice was husky.

He was a man indeed at that moment, and in years had not been so conscious of his manhood. She was not the woman he wanted, now or ever, but the woman he wanted was not the one he could have. He felt the swift coursing of his blood, knew a sudden aching need. And he thought, Why not?

He moved toward her, warily at first, then more quickly and dropping his hat. He put his hands on her and felt a shudder of delight go through the copper-hued body.

She laughed and said, "So you are a man," and gave herself to him in a fierce, demanding way.

X

MARIA lay there, even after Garrett had put on his clothes and was trying to think of the right thing to say before he departed. The gleam was gone from her eyes, and her body was slack. She lay emotionally becalmed.

It surprised him to find that he could look upon her without disgust, that she was still attractive to him. He felt no remorse for the almost savage mating; instead, he was aware of a sense of well-being such as he hadn't known in a long time.

The thought came, This is what I need.

He wasn't in love with her, couldn't be in love with her. But she could rid him of his need for Claire Maury.

She said dreamily, "You like me?"

"I like you, *muchacha.*"

"You are a big, strong man, *Tejano.*" She sat up and pushed back her hair. "But I hate you still. Stay, and I will surely kill you."

"I have a big, fine house in San Alejandro Valley."

"Bah! All Texans are braggarts!" She made a face at him, but her eyes were narrowed and thoughtful. "You have no woman in it?"

"No."

"Oh, you need a cook, then? I am no good at cooking. Besides, I would poison you."

"I'll hire a woman to do the cooking."

"I will have no work? I will do nothing but love you?"

"That's it."

"You want me to pack my things now?"

"No. I'm going to Tombstone."

"How will I get to San Alejandro Valley?"

"If you want to come, you'll find a way."

"For traveling, I have nothing but rags."

Garrett took out his wallet, held out two hundred dollars to her. She grabbed it.

He said, "Go to Tombstone and buy what you need, then hire somebody with a rig to bring you out to San Alejandro."

"I will buy a good, sharp knife, too," Maria said. "Some night when we are in bed, I will slip it between your ribs. *Eso es cierto!*"

He laughed and turned away. He looked back from the door, but she had already put him from her mind. She was greedily counting the money. .

The JG Connected outfit camped outside Trinity that night, and at dawn Garrett, leaving Charlie Harms and the other three hands to drive the recovered cattle back to the ranch, set out for Tombstone with Eric Forsythe. He told the Englishman about Maria, and Forsythe showed no surprise.

"I told you to find a woman," he said. "She'll be good for you." He laughed. "That's quite a statement from a bachelor like me. But it's true. You need a woman for a civilizing influence."

Garrett's smile was rueful. "Some civilizing influence this girl will have on me. She's damn near as wild as an Apache."

"You must see some good in her."

"I don't know. She used to be Ed Reagan's girl, Eric."

Forsythe eyed him curiously. "John, you attract trouble like a magnet attracts metal. Why did you have to choose an outlaw's woman?"

"She made me forget something I wasn't able to forget alone." And then the first doubt came.

They rode on in silence, John Garrett thinking not of Maria but of Claire. . . .

During the few hours that he and Forsythe were in Tombstone to see the three rustlers arraigned and held for trial, Garrett avoided the Alhambra. He avoided the house on Third Street. He left for the San Alejandro Ranch without seeing Claire, but whether or not his resolve would hold when he returned for the trial next month, he did not know.

Back at the ranch, he sent one of the Mexican hands to hire a widow the vaquero knew as cook and housekeeper. The woman, Luisa Gonzales, arrived three days later with her possessions in a blanket-wrapped bundle. She was a pleasant, buxom woman of fifty, and when she turned out to be a good cook, Garrett began taking his meals in the house. He asked Eric Forsythe to eat with him.

Garrett moved his gear into the bedroom which Forsythe called the master bedroom. A week passed, then another—and Maria did not show up. Garrett did not know whether he was disappointed or relieved.

WHEN she did arrive, the third week, he was out on the range tallying a herd of Mexican cattle being delivered from Colonel Maldonado's ranch across the Border. Forsythe rode out with the news.

"She's come, John," the Englishman said. "And I have to admit you have good taste. The lady is—well, breath-takingly lovely."

"Lady?" Garrett said. "I doubt if Maria's ever been called that before."

He let Pete Sarbo take over the tallying, and mounted. As they struck out across the range, Forsythe said, "The man who drove her out is waiting to see you. Said he had a message for you—from Ed Reagan. . . ."

Maria's driver had made himself at home. When Garrett and Forsythe rode into the ranchyard, they saw the light spring wagon over by the barn, the team unhitched and tied to the corral fence. The man was standing in the doorway of the cookhouse smoking his pipe, a cocky little fellow with a too-big mustache. Garrett swung over to him, dismounted.

"You've a message for me?"

"If you're John Garrett."

"I'm John Garrett."

The man puffed on his pipe, then said, "I'm Sam Mercer. That's a nice piece of baggage I hauled out here."

"What's the message?"

Mercer took an envelope from his pocket, held it out. "The man who gave it to me said to tell you Ed Reagan sent it."

Garrett ripped open the envelope, and a .45 cartridge rolled into his hand. The en-

velope contained nothing else. Garrett frowned as he stared at the cartridge.

Forsythe said, "I say, that's odd."

Mercer chuckled. "Short and sweet, that letter."

Garrett looked at him. "It wasn't Reagan who gave it to you?"

"No. How could he?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's in jail in Tucson, a Federal prisoner," Mercer said. "Dan Wyatt arrested him a couple weeks ago. Ed slipped into Tombstone one night to do some roostering. Somebody tipped off the marshal, and Wyatt went into that parlor house and caught Ed at sort of a disadvantage. Wyatt smuggled him out of Tombstone, took him to Tucson. They say Wyatt gagged him so he couldn't yell for help. Matt Reagan is sore as a boil. Anyway, that's why Ed didn't give me that envelope. Anything to take back to Tombstone?"

Garrett smiled thinly. "There's no reply, Mercer."

Mercer took his pipe from his mouth, pointed it at the ranchhouse. "I thought maybe you'd be sending the woman back with me."

"What gave you that notion?"

"That bullet, I reckon."

"It takes more than that to scare me, friend," Garrett said.

"You're the boss," Mercer said. "I'll get started then."

Garrett considered the cartridge gravely, then put it into his coat pocket, threw the envelope away.

Forsythe dismounted and walked with him across the yard.

The Englishman said, "John, I don't understand this."

"A warning, that's all. Ed Reagan wants me to know he's going to kill me for taking Maria."

"But if he's in jail—"

"He won't be in jail forever."

"But I thought he was done with the woman."

"He's just been too busy lately to bother with her," Garrett said. "A man never gets enough of a woman like that. But don't let this bother you. It's been clear all along that Ed Reagan would kill me if he ever got the chance. This message merely means that now he's going to try to find his chance. Forget it. It doesn't worry me, and maybe sending it made Ed feel a little better."

As he entered the house he heard excited chattering in Spanish from his bedroom. He turned into the parlor, reluctant to face the girl, and with sudden misgivings. He'd never before considered having a mistress. He'd wanted Claire Maury, true; he still wanted her, but as his wife.

AFTER a few minutes, he threw his hat onto a chair and strode to his bedroom. He halted in the doorway, somewhat taken aback.

He'd thought that Maria and the housekeeper were merely getting acquainted, but they were involved in something far more interesting to the feminine mind. The buxom Luisa was exclaiming over Maria's clothes. The room, large though it was, was littered with feminine apparel. And Maria was still unpacking!

There were two large trunks, two suitcases, four leather hat boxes, all brand new. Maria held up a bright red dress, so gaudy that Garrett winced, but Luisa went into raptures. They became aware of him suddenly, and his presence put a damper on their spirits. The housekeeper hastily left the room. Maria tossed the red dress back into a trunk, and sat down on the bed. She looked defiant.

"You took long enough to get here," he said. "Maybe you didn't want to come."

"I'm here, *Tejano.*"

"My name is John."

"I know your name—*Tejano.*" She was determined to be difficult.

"You didn't buy all this stuff with the money I gave you."

"You wanted me to come in rags, no?"

"How did you get these clothes?"

"You will get a bill from Carter's store."

"You learn fast."

"*Si.* I am a smart one."

"Smart is right. You let all Tombstone know that you were coming to live with me, did you?"

"Was it to be kept a secret?"

"No. I don't bother to have secrets."

"You can't keep me one, anyway, *Tejano.*"

"The idea was to let Ed Reagan know?"

"He knows," Maria said. "He found out. Now he can wish he hadn't walked out on me—and a lot of good it will do him. What was the letter he sent?"

Garrett took the cartridge from his pocket, held it up for her to see. "That's the whole of it. You savvy?"

Maria laughed. "He will come and kill you and take me away. Or maybe you will kill him and keep me. Which will it be, *Tejano?*"

He dropped the cartridge into his pocket. "You've got the devil in you today," he said. "What's bothering you?"

"There's a woman in Tombstone—that's what's bothering me," Maria said. "Before I left there she came to my hotel room. She gave me a message for you. She said to tell you it won't work. You know what she meant?"

"I've an idea."

"I should have scratched her eyes out. She wants you and thinks I can't hold onto you." Maria was scornful. "A pale, soft woman like that! A man would be tired of her in a week."

Garrett said, "You've got it wrong. She doesn't want me."

"Oh? Then you want her and took me because you couldn't have her. I don't like that!"

"You'll have nothing to complain about."

"If I have, you'll hear of it."

"You like the house?"

"Like you said, it's big and fine."

"But you don't like me?"

Her gaze ran over him. "You're big and strong, *Tejano.*"

He crossed to the bed and reached out a hand to her. She slapped it away.

"I do not feel like that. When I feel like it, I will let you know." Catlike, she slipped away from him. She took something from one of the trunks. "Like I promised, I bought a new knife. You see, *Tejano?*"

It was a hunting-knife in a sheath. She drew the blade from the case, and the naked steel glinted wickedly.

Garrett's face was rocky. He had a wildcat by the tail and dared not let go. He said, "You ever hear what the *bandidos* down across the Border do to people they don't like?"

"*Bandidos!* I spit on them!"

"They sometimes stake people out on ant hills."

A sickly look spread over Maria's face.

Garrett said, "I'll give my men orders to find an ant hill for you if you use that knife on me."

He walked from the room. . . .

GARRETT was in Tombstone for the trial, but the trip was a waste of time. When the case was called, the prosecuting attorney told the judge:

"Your Honor, the defendants in this case are no longer within the jurisdiction of the court. They were released on my bail, and my information is that they have crossed into Mexico and so—"

It was no surprise to John Garrett, but he left the courthouse in disgust. He encountered Deputy United States Marshal Dan Wyatt outside the building, and Wyatt gave him a rueful smile.

"Don't take it too much to heart," he said. "It's not the first time it's happened, and it won't be the last."

"Who posted bail for them, Dan?"

"One of Matt Reagan's friends." Garrett swore. "Every time I stumble, it's a Reagan tripping me up."

"You and me," Wyatt said. "You heard about Ed Reagan?"

"I heard that you finally had him in jail at Tucson."

"In jail—and out."

"He got out on bail, too?"

"The first time. When he got out, I arrested him on another charge. The second time he busted out. Somebody smuggled a gun in to him. He stuck it in a guard's ribs one night. It's lucky he didn't kill somebody. He was like a crazy man from the time he heard—" Wyatt broke off, embarrassed.

Garrett said, "When he heard that his woman was coming to my ranch?"

"Well, yes."

"How'd he hear about it, Dan?"

"Well—"

Garrett eyed him quizzically. "Don't try to spare my feelings. I know what the girl is like. She visited him?"

"So I was told."

"I should have guessed it," Garrett said. "She was a long time in coming out to San Alejandro after I told her to come. She took a trip to Tucson before coming to me. You think she arranged for that smuggled gun?"

Wyatt shook his head. "The way I heard it from the jail guards, she didn't make a friendly visit to Ed. She raised hell with him for throwing her over and mocked him about taking up with you. Besides, it wasn't until five days ago that he broke out. No, my hunch is that Matt Reagan arranged for the gun."

Frowning, Garrett thoughtfully lighted a cigar. "Dan, the outlaw situation is out of hand because Matt Reagan is able to pull too damn many strings. Things won't clear up until he's stripped of his power."

"That's what the vigilantes claim," Wyatt said. "But they haven't been able to get him." He smiled wryly. "I've got no more liking for vigilantes than any lawman has, but maybe vigilante action is the only way to clean up this mess." Wyatt looked harassed. "I won't be able to work with you officially if you decide to go after Matt Reagan vigilante-style, but—well, you won't have me bucking you, John."

"You suggesting that I join the vigilantes?"

"No. I just thought that might be in your mind."

"Well, it is an idea."

"With the right sort of leader, that crowd might do something."

Garrett puffed on his cigar, saying nothing.

Wyatt said, "Whatever you do, watch out for Ed Reagan—for both the Reagans."

He went back into the courthouse.

Garrett had dinner at a restaurant on Allen Street, then went to the OK Corral where he'd left his horse. He reached the livery stable at the same moment Deputy Sheriff Al Rumans did.

Rumans said, "Been looking for you." He handed an envelope to Garrett.

"Still running errands, Al?"

"I take orders from just about everybody."

"With the sheriff's permission?"

Rumans grinned. "What the sheriff don't know won't hurt him." He watched Garrett rip open the envelope. "Say, there's word around the bars and poolrooms that somebody's pulled your number out of the hat."

"Who's the somebody?"

"The Ring."

"What's that?"

RUMANS shrugged. "Just a name folks have for the outlaw crowd," he said. "It takes in the whole bunch, from the hard man with the brains to the waddy who steals a cow or horse, now and then. Want some advice, Garrett?"

"I'd listen to some from you, friend."

"Don't take the road through the Dragoons when you leave Tombstone."

"Bushwhack, Al?"

"Could be," said Rumans. "Take it easy, and you'll live longer."

He walked away, leaving Garrett to think over his advice and to read his letter.

The letter was the briefest sort of note, and read:

> Mr. Garrett:
> I understand that you are in town today, and I would like to see you. If it isn't inconvenient, please come to my house this afternoon.
> Claire Maury

He stared at the few neatly written words with mingled feelings, pleased that she should send for him and yet, because of Maria, reluctant to accept the invitation. He could think only that during the time since he had last seen Claire she had come to realize that her way of life here in Tombstone was not proper. But it was too late, for Maria was now in his house and in his bed. A reasonably subdued Maria since he'd put fear into her with that threat she hadn't known had been bluff.

If there was any lack in their relationship, the blame lay with him. It had not worked out; instead of forgetting Claire while he had Maria in his arms, he found the thought of Claire sharper than ever in his mind. He told himself that no good would come of his accepting Claire's invitation but, pocket-

ing her note, he turned toward Third Street.

XI

EVIDENTLY Claire had been waiting, for she opened the door immediately after Garrett knocked.

She said, "Come in," and when he had entered and the door was closed, she added, "Should I say that it's nice of you to have called?"

"I think you expected me to come."

"Yes, I did. In spite of your woman." Her voice was mocking, her smile amused. "You'll always come running when I send for you, even though you have her. Am I making you uncomfortable, talking about her?"

"You hold the whip, Claire. Use it."

"I have used it. I was curious to know if I could still make you come. Now I know."

He looked at her frowningly. "I'd hoped you'd decided you had enough of the Alhambra, that you wanted me to help you get located in a more decent way."

"Would the Mexican girl let you help me?"

"She has nothing to do with you and me."

"I'm not so sure she'd agree," Claire said. "She'll fight for what she wants and to hold on to what she wins. Did you know that I've met her?"

He nodded. "She gave me your message."

Claire laughed. "When she made it common knowledge that she was going to the San Alejandro Ranch, I had to know what sort of woman you'd found as a substitute for me. She's quite a girl, John. But I don't think she'll be good for you in the long run."

"You've had your fun," he said, his temper slipping. "Do you mind if I leave?"

He turned to the door, jerked it open.

"John, wait!"

The sharp urgency in her voice halted him. He closed the door, looked at her in surprise. Her amusement was gone, and a conflict was going on within her. She was tense, her face strained.

"What is it, Claire?" he asked, suddenly anxious.

"John, they are going to murder you!"

"The Reagans?"

"Yes. Not they themselves, but—"

"Some hired gunman?"

She nodded. "Several."

"Out along the road through the Dragoons?"

"I don't know," Claire said. "Matt boasted that some men are going to take care of you. He told me because—well, because I have reason to hate you."

"But you're warning me."

"I don't want any part of murder!" She avoided his gaze. "I haven't forgotten that you killed my husband, and once I thought I wanted nothing in this world as much as to see you punished. But now—now I can't let you be killed as you killed Ben Maury. I'm soft and weak, I suppose."

He moved toward her. "It's more than that," he told her. "Only a part of you hates me. The other part—"

He seized her roughly, pulled her to him, found her lips with his. He felt a shudder go through her and released her, stepped back.

"You're strong-willed," he said. "You don't give in, even to yourself."

"I can't bear to have you touch me." She looked at him bleakly. "Why did it have to be you who killed Ben? Why do you have to be a man who takes other men's lives?"

Garrett shook his head. "If you don't know the answer to that after all this time in Arizona, you'll never know." He turned from her, then said, from the door, "I took Maria hoping she would help me get over you. You told her it wouldn't work, and you were right."

He went out, and this time she did not call him back.

Walking toward Allen Street, Garrett accepted the hard fact he so long had refused to face. Claire was not for him. The Dude's death placed her beyond his reach. Fate had played a grim joke on him, letting him fall in love with a woman whose husband he had killed.

He swore with futile anger. But he did not blame Claire for feeling revulsion when touched by the hands which had taken her husband's life.

As he headed toward the OK Corral,

men on the busy street marked his passing, and their sharp interest told him they were aware that, as Al Rumans had said, his name had been pulled from the hat, that he was marked for death.

NO DOUBT they saw him as a walking dead man. The outlaw crowd had struck before at men who bucked the Reagan bunch, so it was taken for granted that John Garrett was as good as dead.

Sheriff Quartermane stepped from Blucher's gun-shop, coming face to face with Garrett. The sheriff merely nodded briefly, and Garrett thought, No warning from you, Sheriff? He had no doubt that Quartermane was aware that he was to be ambushed, for what Al Rumans knew the sheriff also knew. But Jess Quartermane was Matt Reagan's man and had to play the Ring's game. Garrett silently cursed any man who wore a star and tarnished it by playing along with the lawless.

He reached the livery stable, halted before it, caught up by the idea of going to the Alhambra and forcing Matt Reagan into a showdown. The law couldn't or wouldn't touch the man, but here in Arizona a six-shooter was law, too, and in the hand of a game, honest man it couldn't be bought or scared off.

The temptation was great, but caution told Garrett that the idea was foolhardy. Matt Reagan would not be goaded into a gun-fight. He might hire gunmen, but he kept himself safe as he had that day Garrett went to his office upstairs in the Alhambra—hands flat on his desk, withdrawn from the violence that had erupted in the room.

There was another reason to be cautious, Garrett realized. Reagan's men would probably cut him down before he ever reached their boss, and to Tombstone, which boasted it had a man for breakfast each morning, his death would be just another killing.

But there had to be a way to get Matt Reagan. Every man had his blind side, and Reagan's merely had to be found. Garrett told himself that he would from today on give his attention to the matter, and turned into the stable.

He rode slowly from the town. To let those who watched have their fun and report to Matt Reagan, he took the road across the mesa toward the Dragoons. Once out of sight of the town, he left the road and headed southwest toward Charlestown. He ate supper in that grubby mining town, then rode on, crossing the San Pedro, and at midnight halted in the shadows of the moon-drenched Mule Mountains. He off-saddled and staked out his horse, then spread out his bedroll.

In the gray dawn, he was in saddle again. When daylight came, he halted to study his back-trail. There were no riders following him, though by now, he was sure, Reagan's bushwhackers must have figured out which trail he had taken. That they hadn't come after him gave Garrett a certain satisfaction, for it was evidence that the gunmen feared to make an attempt on his life except from ambush.

Following a circuitous route, he reached J. C. Wheeler's Wagon Wheel Ranch headquarters at sundown and had supper with Wheeler and his crew. After the meal, the talk got around to rustlers. A graying man past his prime, Wheeler had been one of the earliest cattlemen to follow Garrett into the Territory from Texas. He was one of the organizers of the Arizona Cattlemen's Association, a vigilante band, and it was he who had asked Garrett to become a member. Now he admitted the Association had failed in its purpose.

"The situation is growing worse, and the thieves are making more money than some of us cattlemen," he complained. "A lot of us small ranchers could go broke because of rustling."

"What's wrong with the Association, J. C.?"

"It turned out just like you said it was apt to. Some of the members try to use the organization to work off grudges against each other, and others who ain't too honest work with the Association with one hand and the rustler crowd with the other."

Garrett nodded. "That's why I go it alone."

"You been bothered yet?"

"Once. I got my cattle back, though, and caught the thieves."

"Well, you're big enough to buck that crowd."

"But not big enough to put the thieves behind bars," Garrett said, rising. "Tell you what, J. C., the next time you cut rustler sign, send a rider over to my headquarters. I'll bring some of my hands and see if we can't track them down."

Old Wheeler looked pleased. "I sure will." Then while his visitor saddled his horse he said, "I'll make the same offer, Garrett. If you ever need help from my outfit, just send word and I'll come running."

Riding away from Wagon Wheel, Garrett had the wry thought that there wasn't likely to be a time when the rustlers caused him so much trouble he wouldn't be able to deal with them. But on reaching his headquarters, at midnight, he found out how wrong he was. The Reagan crowd had finally got around to raiding the San Alejandro in genuine bandit fashion!

GARRETT knew something had happened when he topped a rise and saw lights. Ordinarily, a ranch headquarters was the darkest of places an hour or two after nightfall. Now the windows and doorways of both the main house and bunkhouse glowed with lamplight.

He reached the ranchyard to find that a dozen of the hands had just ridden in and were off-saddling. They'd aroused the coosie to get them a meal, and now a lamp blossomed in the cookshack.

Old Charlie Harms dumped his saddle on the ground and came to meet Garrett who said, as he dismounted, "Charlie, what's happened?"

Harms said, "Hell to pay. I'll give it to you quick, Boss, then explain it afterwards. There's bandit trouble down at the south end of the valley, and Ed Reagan came after the woman."

Garrett swore. "Get on with it, man."

"One of the hands, Juan Robles, is dead. The Englishman is shot up."

"What the hell was it? A battle?"

"Reagan came here with a half-dozen men," Harms said. "They rode in at dusk, when only Juan, Forsythe, Chick Marvin, and the coosie were here. They caught all but Chick at supper. Only Juan was armed. He grabbed for his gun, but was cut down. The coosie ducked behind the stove, but Forsythe picked up Juan's gun and started shooting. He downed two of the coyotes before they plugged him. Their bodies are laid out in the barn. Chick grabbed a horse and hightailed."

"Where were you and Pete and the rest of the hands, for God's sake?"

"Toled away from headquarters. Tobe Adams from our line camp down near the Border came riding in hell-for-leather in the middle of the afternoon. He said a big bunch of riders had come onto our range from the south—Mexican bandits, he thought. Pete told Juan and Chick and Forsythe to stay put, and the rest of us to saddle up. It was sundown when we got to the line camp and the hands there were forted up, expecting a battle. There was no sign of *bandidos* by then, though. Pete and a half-dozen went to scout the range. They were still out when Chick showed up with the news that Reagan had raided headquarters. I brought some of the boys back with me. Juan dead, Forsythe shot up, and your woman gone. We tried to catch up with Reagan and his four gunhands. It wasn't any use."

Garrett nodded. "All right, Charlie. Where's Forsythe?"

"In the house. The Mex woman is taking care of him."

Garrett found Luisa coming from the bedroom into which Forsythe had been taken.

"How bad is he, Luisa?"

"I've seen worse wounds, senor."

"He needs a doctor?"

"I do not think so."

Garrett entered the bedroom. Forsythe lay motionless, his face gray. He managed a faint smile. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Sorry, John, but I'm not much of a gunfighter."

"You did all right, the way I hear. How serious is it, Eric?"

"A flesh wound in my left side. Nicked ribs, no doubt. I lost a lot of blood. But Luisa is something of a doctor. You know the blighters killed Juan?"

Garrett nodded. "I know. I won't forget." He moved restlessly about the room.

"What about the girl, Eric?"

"After they left the cookshack, I dragged myself to the doorway and saw Reagan bring her from the house." There was a question in Forsythe's eyes. "Why, John?"

"I've got a decision to make," Garrett said. "I'm bothered about what's happening down at the line camp. I should get down there."

"I see. But you should rescue Maria."

"I'm not so sure she doesn't want to be with Reagan."

"She fought him like a tigress."

"Then I've got to try to get her away from him," Garrett said, and returned to the bedside. "I'll leave some of the hands here at headquarters. If your wound keeps bothering you, Luisa can send one of them to Tombstone for a doctor."

"All right, old man. Good hunting."

Garrett smiled thinly, left the room.

HE TOOK eight men with him, and timed his departure from ranch headquarters so that it was dawn when they rode from San Alejandro Valley. With daylight to aid him in his search, Garrett scattered his riders to look for sign. He scouted the pass through the mountain range that was the northern boundary of his ranch. It was better to make haste slowly than to go chasing across the countryside without some knowledge of the direction Ed Reagan had taken.

There were hoof tracks through the pass, but confused ones. His own riders traveled through there frequently, and last night Charlie Harms had led a dozen of them out and back through it. Beyond the hilly country was a road used by riders and rigs from neighboring ranches to such an extent that Reagan's tracks would be lost if he had followed the road.

Anyhow, Ed Reagan would hardly have kept to the road, because of the danger of someone reporting him to a searching party. He also would avoid ranches and settlements, almost certainly keep to the back country. But in two hours of searching, Garrett found no sign that his quarry had left the pass to enter the mountains.

At mid-morning he and his riders met at the north end of the pass. No one had anything to report except Chris Bateman, who said, "I caught up with a freight rig about five miles east of here. The freighter said he'd camped back about three miles from where I overtook him. He didn't hear any riders during the night, and he went into camp right after sundown."

Garrett nodded, and thoughfully lighted a cigar.

The hands, dismounted, lounged about smoking brown-paper cigarettes. Garrett hunkered down beside Charlie Harms.

"What do you think, Charlie?"

"Unless he had fresh horses staked out somewhere, the broncs him and his men are riding must be near finished by now. He came from plenty far off and must have pushed them hard ever since the raid. I doubt it he'd risk showing himself at any ranch to get fresh mounts."

"Not unless he's got friends at one."

"Even friends will talk when an hombre carries off a woman."

Garrett nodded. "It looks as though he must have a hideout picked not too far from here. He probably figured there wouldn't be any real search, so hiding close to the San Alejando Ranch wouldn't be much of a risk."

"Why would he figure that?" Harms asked. "He'd know you'd want the girl back."

"He and Matt knew that I was due to testify in court," Garrett said. "They had an ambush set up when I left Tombstone, but I was warned and didn't ride into it. Ed don't know I wasn't bushwhacked. He's hoping I was. So he'd figure that with me dead, my crew wouldn't bother much about getting the girl back." He paused, puffed on his cigar. Then he said, "Charlie, remember Grazia Plaza?"

"Could I forget it?" Harms said. "If we'd finished off Ed the night we wiped out his old crowd there—You think he went that way?"

"A hunch," Garrett said. "He might figure nobody would expect him to head away from Tombstone. It's in lonely country, and he's got friends there." He rose. "We'll head for there, Charlie."

"There's just one thing, Boss. Is she worth it?"

"Now, Charlie—"

"Don't get riled," Harms said, rising. "I'm thinking about what may be happening down at the line camp while we're fooling around up here."

Garrett said, "Don't think I'm not worrying about that, too," and went to his horse.

XII

WHEN the J. G. Connected crew saw the few lights of Grazia Plaza, it was about eight o'clock. They halted outside the place, Garrett saying, "We'll try the cantina. Charlie, you go in with me. I doubt if we're expected—if Reagan is here—but we'll take no chances. Felipe, you and Tip ride to the far end of the street and stand guard. Tom and Chuck will take the near end. Let's go."

They rode in, two men dropping off at the edge of town, two others loping on to the far side, and three sitting their horses outside the cantina while Garrett and Harms dismounted and went through the doorway where young Jake Reagan had died when the Texans last visited here.

Two Mexicans sat at a table playing dominos and another stood at the bar talking to the proprietor. The big hanging lamp that the Dude—Ben Maury—had shattered with a shot had been repaired. The proprietor, a fat man with a *bandido* mustache, looked around unconcernedly, then a look of shock spread over his face.

"Por Dios! El Tejano!"

Charlie Harms stood watchful by the door as Garrett went to the bar. The man there moved to its far end, ready to duck out the back door. The domino players sat frozen. The three of them must have been here the night Garrett and his men had wiped out most of Ed Reagan's old crowd. He ignored them, looked at the fat man behind the bar.

"You talk gringo?"

"Si, senor."

"Good. You know what I want?"

"Please, amigo, I mind my own business."

"Where's Reagan got her?"

"I do not know.'

"He's got her here in Grazio Plaza?"

"No, senor!"

Garrett looked at the customers, one by one. Their faces were blank, but there was uneasiness in their eyes. Reagan *had* come here with Maria, but finding out more was apt to be difficult. These men were probably more afraid of Ed Reagan than of him, and wouldn't talk willingly. He looked at the fat man again.

"What's your name?"

"Tafoya—Hermandez Tafoya."

"All right, Tafoya. I won't fool around." Garrett took out his wallet, counted out five hundred dollars. "That's for the information I want."

All four men stared wide-eyed at the bills on the bar.

Tafoya shook his head regretfully. "I know nothing."

"Ed Reagan came here with four other hombres and a Mexican girl?"

"I did not say so." Tafoya's mustache quivered. "I will not say so."

"Five hundred dollars is a lot of money."

"It is more money than I ever saw at one time before. But money is no good to a dead man. If I say one word, Senor Reagan will come back and kill me."

"He won't be able to, if I catch up with him."

Tafoya pushed the bills toward Garrett with a pudgy forefinger. "Take your money and go, my friend. Leave us in peace."

Garrett picked up the money, held it up for the others to see. "This is probably more money than there is in all Grazia Plaza. Is there one of you with nerve enough to earn it?"

The domino players squirmed.

The man at the far end of the bar said, as though thinking out loud, "I have a horse. It is not a very good horse, but maybe it could take me where Senor Reagan would not find me. I have no women to keep me here. But where would I go, where Senor Reagan would not find me?"

Garrett looked at him, a swarthy little man with a pock-marked face. He said, "You can go to Sonora or to New Mexico."

Tafoya said, "Jorge, be careful!"

Jorge shrugged his thin shoulders. "I have always been careful—and poor." He came along the bar to Garrett. "They came here early this morning, senor. They got a meal and fresh horses, and Reagan told

everyone to say that they had not been here. The girl—she called on us to take her away from those hombres. But we were afraid."

"Where'd they go, Jorge?"

"North, into the hills. To an old sheep ranch. Reagan has used it before."

"Take me to it and the money is yours."

"I will get my horse," Jorge said.

TWO hours later Jorge reined in his pinto atop a timbered ridge. "That is the sheep camp, senor. You will find Ed Reagan there, I think."

Garrett saw several small adobe buildings in the valley beyond. "We'll soon see, and if you're right, you'll get your money."

"But you said I would get it if I showed you the camp, amigo!"

"Yeah. With the understanding that Reagan and the girl are there."

"I will wait here, senor."

Garrett started quartering down the slope, his men following. He reined in at the bottom of the slope.

"We'll surround the place, but hold your fire until I give the word to open up. I don't want the girl in danger."

He walked toward the dark dobes, with Charlie Harms following him and the others moving off quietly through the darkness. No one challenged them, and Garrett shortly reached a corral. There were only three horses in the pen. He signaled to Harms to look inside the barn.

Harms ducked in and reappeared almost immediately. "Nothing," he whispered.

There were two other squat buildings with *viga* poles jutting from their walls, as Garrett eased up to the nearer one, he kicked an empty tin can he'd failed to notice. The next instant there was an explosive sound from inside the dobe. Maria was screaming something in Spanish.

Garrett flung himself against the door, but it was barred on the inside. Maria was screaming that she would kill anybody who came in.

He called, "Open up, Maria! It's John!"

Charlie Harms yelled, "Watch it—watch it."

Garrett swung around, saw the flash of a gun at the doorway of the other building. Harms cut loose with his six-shooter, firing three shots as fast as he could work hammer and trigger. A man cried out and tumbled out of the doorway, sprawling face-down and not moving again.

From inside the building another man shouted, "Hold it—hold it!"

Garrett called, "Come on out—with your hands up!"

The man who appeared had pulled on his pants but not his boots.

"Where's Reagan?" Garrett demanded.

"Not here. He left Jerry and me to guard the girl."

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. He just said that he'd be gone two, three days."

Garrett said, "Keep an eye on him, Charlie," and went to the other building as the rest of his men drifted in from the darkness. His disappointment was no small thing. He'd counted on finding Ed Reagan here, and it was Reagan he wanted lying dead rather than the man who had been killed.

He called to Maria again.

"That's you, *Tejano?*" she asked. "It's really you?"

"Sure, *muchacha*. Open up."

Light suddenly glowed through the cracks of the door, then she opened it for him. He stepped inside, saw that she'd lighted a candle in the neck of a bottle on a plank table. Her dress had been ripped off one shoulder and the marks of somebody's fist were on her face. Her left eye was black and there was an ugly bruise on her jaw.

She was sulky. "You took long enough to come get me, *Tejano*."

"But I got here," he said. "Do you have to fight about everything? Who beat you? Ed?"

"Yes." Maria swore in Spanish. "I fought him, so he couldn't have me. But he beat me and tore my clothes off me and I couldn't help myself." She was more put out with Garrett than with the outlaw. "Why didn't you come before, eh?"

"Finding you so soon took some doing."

"That no-good Ed Reagan said you were dead, that you would never get back from Tombstone."

"He took too much for granted."

"He told me that every time you are in

Tombstone you go to see that gringa."

"He was trying to sour you on me."

"He told the truth, I think!" Maria said hotly. "He got it from his brother Matt, and this woman works in Matt Reagan's place. You sleep with her when you go there, no?"

"No."

"You lie, *Tejano!*"

HE SHOOK his head. "I wouldn't lie to you, Maria. I'll tell you the truth about her, then you can forget her. I asked her to come away with me, but she wouldn't. Don't let Ed make trouble between us, *muchacha.* Say, do you know where he went?"

"No. All I know is that he bragged he was going to strip your range clean of cattle."

So Reagan had gone to join the men who had come onto the southern part of San Alejandro range. Garrett said, "Let's start back to the ranch, Maria."

Only Charlie Harms was in sight when Garrett followed Maria from the hut, and he was saddling a horse for Maria. One of the other two horses that had been in the pen now stood outside it, but the third had disappeared.

Charlie Harms said, "Let's get started, Boss. The boys will catch up."

He mounted, waited for Garrett to help Maria up and mount his own horse, then rode out at once. He said nothing until they were climbing the slope to the ridge where their guide waited for his money.

"It's better this way, Boss," he said then. "The boys hanging that hombre will make 'em feel better about Juan Robles—and about Forsythe. Maybe it'll throw a scare into Ed Reagan, too. Besides, I don't think you could have talked the boys out of it."

Garrett didn't speak.

There wasn't any use saying anything. . . .

They got back to ranch headquarters at noon the following day, tired and hungry and their horses all in. The four hands Garrett had left there had heard nothing from the line camp.

Garrett told one, "Saddle a fresh bronc for me."

He dismounted, helped Maria down and went into the house with her. She hurried to her bedroom with Luisa following her and making a fuss, and Garrett went to Eric Forsythe's room. The Englishman was sitting up, reading. He gave Garrett an expectant look.

"You brought her back, John?"

"Yeah. How are you feeling?"

"Chipper. Did you find that blighter, Ed Reagan?"

"No. Like always, he moves too fast for me."

"Well, there's always another time," Forsythe said.

Garrett nodded. "I'll see you later, friend. I'm going to the line camp."

Forsythe regarded him with concern. "Better get some rest first."

Garrett said, "Later," and went out. He was tired to the core, having gone two nights without sleep, and he wanted badly to sleep—with Maria in his arms. But he crossed to the cookshack and drank two cups of hot, black coffee, then rode out on a fresh mount, a stocky dun gelding he lifted to a lope.

The great valley stretched out ahead, reaching all the way into Mexico, an undulating sea of grass with numerous canyons branching off it. He saw scattered bunches of cattle, but even though his herd presently tallied about seven thousand head, they were all but lost in the immensity of the range.

As Eric Forsythe said, it was a small empire. And Garrett thought that Forsythe might have also have said that history proved a man forever had to fight to hold an empire. He had a feeling that from now on he would have to fight to hold onto the San Alejandro Ranch, and fight hard. For the Reagans would fight him to the finish.

He reached the line camp at sundown. It was almost on the Border, that imaginary line that separated the United States and Mexico. The camp consisted of some old adobe buildings that had once belonged to the Monteros family and had been repaired by the men Garrett kept posted there to guard the southern portion of the range.

Most of his hands were there now, lounging about as though waiting for something to happen. All wore six-shooters and some

had rifles handy. A half-dozen horses stood saddled. His segundo, Pete Sarbo, came to meet him as he dismounted. Sarbo's Indian-dark face was grave.

"What's going on here, Pete?"

SARBO said, "Something I can't handle. And I'm damn glad you showed up. There's a big bunch of Mex bandits squatting at Chicote Creek, and their *jefe* just laughs when I tell him to vamoose. They haven't made any move against us, and so far they haven't gathered any of our cattle to move out. But they're eating our beef, and you can guess how much beef forty *bandidos* can stow away. Besides—"

"Who's head man?"

"Calls himself Colonel Jesus Merardo. Mex bandit leaders always give themselves military titles and claim to be revolutionists. *El coronel* says he's camping here because the *Rurales* are gunning for him. Me, I think he's lying."

"What makes you think that, Pete?"

"While they keep us busy watching them, rustlers are working the range," Sarbo said sourly. "I spotted them yesterday about sundown, and I took a long swing across the range during the night. They were busy all night. They come out of the mountains in small bunches, each bunch grabs a few cattle, and by morning there's no sign of them. I figure they could have run off five hundred head of our stock in one night. I've been in a sweat trying to figure out what to do. If I go after the rustlers, those *bandidos* are apt to make a clean sweep of the south range and drive the cattle down to Sonora. If I try to drive the *bandidos* off the range, a lot of our boys will get killed." Sarbo swore bitterly. "Them rustlers have made some deal with Merardo—to keep us busy while they steal our cattle."

"He'll talk with you?"

"Sure. He's as friendly as a *padre*."

"I'll read the riot act to him," Garrett said. "Shift my saddle to a fresh mount while I get something to eat, eh, Pete?"

They rode out a half-hour later, topped a low rise a mile from the line camp and saw the flickering glare of a half-dozen campfires through the thickening dusk. They rode directly toward the bandit camp until challenged by a sentry. Sarbo, speaking Spanish, said that he and Senor Garrett wanted to see *el coronel*. While the sentry shouted to the camp, Garrett saw that the band's horses were grazing in a loose bunch a hundred yards away on the opposite side of the shallow creek. Only two riders guarded the remuda.

Garrett said, "Pete, when we leave, we'll take their horses with us."

Sarbo gave him a startled look, then glanced toward the remuda. "Let's try," he said.

The sentry got orders to let them pass, and they rode slowly toward the fires. A man with a rifle met them, said, "You will dismount, senores." He was a villainous looking sort, lean as a whip and with a ragged scar across his left cheek. He wore a bandolier across his chest in the usual *bandido* fashion and his sombrero must have been the largest he could find it all Sonora.

Garrett and Sarbo dismounted, and he gestured with his rifle for them to walk ahead of him. They were escorted to a man who sat on an up-ended water keg by one of the fires, a beefy man wearing a Mexican Army tunic, but that was the only thing military about him. He wore a steeple-crowned sombrero and velvet *calzoneras* that were skin-tight except for their bell-shaped cuffs. He was smoking a cigar, and a water-bag, no doubt containing tequila, was at his feet. A broad smile on his heavy-jowled face made him look amiably stupid, but John Garrett looked into his dark eyes and saw the innate cunning of Jesus Merardo.

Garrett said, *"El Coronel?"*

The bandit looked pleased at being greeted by his self-assumed title. He spoke in Spanish, his face beaming, but too rapid Spanish for Garrett to catch.

The Texan said, "I have so little Spanish, *El Coronel*."

He and Sarbo were surrounded now, curiosity having brought Merardo's men from their eating, drinking and gambling about the other fires. They were a wild-looking bunch, and the smell of them was strong. One who was different than the

others—a tall, slender youth with smooth cheeks, and good-looking in a rather feminine way—stepped forward, stood by Merardo. He wore his sombrero hanging at his shoulders by its chin strap; his *chaqueta* was embroidered with gold threads and the buttons were silver, while his tan *calzoneras* had insets of lace at the bottom of the legs.

He bowed. "Permit me, senores," he said, his voice as soft as a woman's. "I am *El Coronel's segundo,* Captain Garcia. You are Senor Garrett?"

"That's right, Captain."

Garcia translated for Merardo, and there was quite a flow of Spanish between them before Garcia said, "Senor Garrett, I am to explain Colonel Merardo's position. He is a patriot of Mexico, but he has been forced to seek political sanctuary on your range, and is grateful to you for having permitted him to stay. He promises to reward your hospitality in due time."

Garrett nodded. "And in the meantime, Captain?"

Garcia smiled, showing fine white teeth. "Colonel Merardo plans to return to Mexico and recruit more *soldados* for *la revolucion.* His return could be hastened, Senor Garrett."

"With my help, maybe? I'm listening, Captain."

Garcia turned to Merardo and again there was a lengthy conversation in Spanish, then the captain said, in English, *"El Coronel* feels that we could return to Mexico upon delivery of certain supplies."

"Such as?"

"A half dozen kegs of horse-shoes, a half hundred repeating rifles, five thousand rounds of ammunition, fifty horses, five hundred head of cattle, and a small amount of tobacco and coffee."

Pete Sarbo swore under his breath.

Garrett was more amused than angry, but concealed his feelings behind a blank face. "Some of this might be arranged, Captain."

Garcia was surprised. "Ah?"

"But you understand Captain, that to give away cattle is to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. You savvy?"

"Si. I was educated in San Antonio. I know one does not kill the goose." Garcia laughed, and the bandit chief, though he did not understand, joined in. Then the captain said, "There are plenty of cattle in Sonora, Senor Garrett. It was just a bargaining point."

"A man must always ask for more than he wants, eh?"

"Si."

"As for the rifles—"

Garcia's face fell.

"It will take some little time to get them."

Garcia's smile returned. "We will wait, Senor Garrett!"

He shook hands with Garrett, then Merardo, without rising, offered his hand. Garcia explained to all the men that Senor Garrett was to furnish them with supplies, and there was a lot of chattering, laughter, back-slapping. Garrett took his departure, promising to set out at once for Tombstone to buy the rifles. As he and Sarbo mounted and rode from the camp, there were shouts of *"Viva Mexico! Viva la Revolution!"* behind them.

Sarbo said, "You were good, Boss. You almost convinced me."

Garrett laughed. "I almost convinced myself. You think we can get their remuda?"

"Like I said before, let's try."

Garrett had a moment's doubt. They would need luck to drive off the bandits' mounts, but if successful, they would have Merardo in a tight spot. The bandits would rather be without their arms than set afoot. But at the moment they had their arms, and there were enough of them to hit something if they opened fire. On the other hand, Garrett reflected, it was now full dark and he and Sarbo would be poor targets.

"Come along, Pete," he decided.

They swung toward Chicote Creek, splashed across, then lifted their horses to a lope headed directly toward the remuda. Both men drew their six-shooters. The two *remuderos* saw them only as shadowy figures in the darkness.

One called, *"Quien es? Quien es?"*

They galloped past him, came up behind the band of horses. They yelled at the animals, fired their guns into the air. The remuda spooked, raced away in wild stam-

pede. The second *remudero* shouted a curse, fired a shot—so close that Garrett was momentarily blinded by the muzzle flash. Garrett fired and missed, but the *remudero* wheeled away in panicky flight.

Sarbo followed the horses, still yelling and firing his gun. Garrett looked back and had a glimpse of shadowy figures running from the camp, but before the bandits started shooting he and Sarbo—and the remuda—were out of bullet range.

They drove the animals past the line camp, then let them race on across the range. The thunder of hoofs had alerted the men at the camp, and they were deployed about the buildings with cocked guns in anticipation of a *bandido* attack. Sarbo called to them to hold their fire, and he and Garrett rode in and dismounted.

"What now, Boss?" Sarbo asked. "You sure they won't want a fight? They can hoof it this far, easy."

Garrett shook his head. "Nothing takes the fight out of riding men like being set afoot. Merardo will send somebody—Garcia, maybe—to parley in the morning. Meanwhile, there's the rustlers.—Pete, I'm dead for sleep and I'm going to catch some now. Later, we'll go rustler-hunting."

XIII

UNTIL midnight, Garrett slept. Then, with Sarbo and a half dozen of the hands, he rode north across the range. There was a three-quarters moon, but most of the time it was smudged over by clouds and there were few stars.

"Rustler's moon," Sarbo said. "It was around Halfway Creek that I spotted riders last night."

They traveled at an easy lope, heading toward the small stream that twisted across the valley about midway. The range there was the logical part for the thieves to raid, for it was isolated from ranch headquarters and the line camp. Reaching the creek, they dismounted to rest their horses and to listen.

Hearing nothing, Garrett led the way across the stream and toward the mountains. If rustlers were active tonight, they must have struck at dusk, or even earlier, since they were so bold, and driven the stolen cattle toward the mountains while he slept. They had to be clear of San Alejandro range before dawn.

A chill wind sprang up, and they had it in their faces while they rode toward the mountains. When they halted again the moon was hidden and there were no longer any stars. Flashes of lightning bloomed above the mountain ridges.

Sarbo said, "A good storm is just what we need. Rain will wash out what tracks the rustlers leave."

They listened for the sound of riders and the bawling of driven cattle, but heard nothing but the howling of the wind and the distant booming of thunder. They were in the broken country at the base of the uplifts when the storm broke. Slickers carried behind saddle cantles were donned as the first spatter of rain came.

Garrett, who had no slicker, turned up the collar of his old corduroy coat, settled his hat more firmly on his head, and rode on through the rough country. Rain fell in wind-driven torrents, and Garrett had to face the fact that there was little chance of his intercepting the rustlers tonight or, if the storm lasted long, of finding their tracks when daylight came. Thunder and lightning were like a tremendous artillery duel now, and Garrett had to shout to make himself heard.

"No use going on," he told his men. "We'll turn back."

They had started to turn their horses when, in the midst of a long flashing of blue-green lightning, Pete Sarbo said, "Hold it!"

He was staring in the direction they had been traveling, and Garrett, twisting in the saddle, peered that way. It was utterly black for a moment, then another series of flashes bloomed and in the eerie light he glimpsed through the curtain of rain a bunch of cattle being hazed along by three riders. He swung toward them, drawing his gun, and Sarbo and the others rode after him.

It was black for a moment, then luridly bright again, and one of the rustlers saw them. His warning yell cut through the tumult of the storm. He and another wheeled

away from the cattle in immediate flight, but the third man's fright froze him. They rode in on him and Sarbo, with a shouted oath, lined his gun on him.

Garrett had a glimpse of the rustler's face—a frightened boy's face. He leaned from the saddle and knocked Sarbo's gun just as the man squeezed the trigger. Sarbo turned on his boss in hot anger.

"It's a kid," Garrett said. "Hold him here."

He and the others left Sarbo and the prisoner, went after the two who had fled. They had one glimpse of them, then there was no lightning for several minutes and their quarry vanished through the stormy blackness. They searched for perhaps a quarter of an hour, then found their way back to where Sarbo and the captured rustler waited. Sarbo had cooled off.

He said, "Sorry, John. I guess I lost my head."

"It's all right, Pete."

"Some fish we caught. A half-starved kid. He's not even packing a gun."

Garrett could almost feel the terror in the youth. "Maybe he's just the fish we needed to catch," he said. "Kid, you're going to take us to Ed Reagan. You savvy?"

The rustler stared back at him, fear making his thin face stupid.

"What's your name, anyway?"

There was no reply.

"Talk up, son!"

Sarbo said, "He's scared to death—or deaf and dumb."

GARRETT realized that the youth was indeed paralyzed by fear. He said, "I'll take him to headquarters and coax it out of him. Pete, you and the boys head back to the line camp. I don't think you'll have any trouble with those *bandidos,* but keep your eyes open. I'll be there in the morning." He looked at the young rustler. "You come with me, son."

The boy lifted his reins and rode along willingly enough as Garrett struck out for ranch headquarters.

Much of the storm's fury had passed by the time they reached headquarters. The rain was now a steady downpour with only an occasional glare of lightning and rumble of thunder. They put up their horses, then Garrett took the kid to the cookshack where a lamp still burned and the coffee pot was on the stove. Garrett poured coffee for them both, then studied the young rustler.

The youth's hands shook so badly that he needed both to hold the tin cup. Garrett judged him to be about sixteen, the age at which his own son had died. But this boy was nothing like Dan had been. And as Sarbo had said, he was half-starved. Garrett had seen better clothes on a scarecrow in a corn field.

When the boy set down his cup, Garrett asked, "Feel better?"

The youth nodded.

"My name's John Garrett. What's yours?"

"Tom. Tom Dawson."

"Where you from, Tom?"

"Missouri."

"You're a long way from home."

"My pa died. My ma got hitched again. The man she married kicked me out."

Garrett took out and lighted a cigar. "You came to Arizona and got in with bad company, eh?"

Tom shook his head. "They wasn't so bad. I couldn't get a job in Tombstone, and they let me throw in with them. I was hungry and—"

"Who were they, son?"

"I forget."

"All right," Garrett said. "I won't try to make you talk about your friends. But I caught you stealing my cattle and I know you were doing it for Ed Reagan. He's plain no good, Tom, and—"

"I only saw him once—when my partners said they had a riding job and took me with them. We went into the mountains outside of Tombstone. There was a big camp there. About forty men. And one night this Ed Reagan showed up. That's the only time I ever saw him."

"What happened when he showed up?"

"He said he was going to help us make a lot of money," Tom said. "He said we were going to move a lot of cattle off a range, and wouldn't have any trouble doing it. He told us to split up in small bunches and each bunch try and pick up forty or fifty head of cattle. Last night my partners

tried to get some cattle but we didn't find any. Tonight we found thirty or more. That's all, mister."

"Where were you to take the cattle?"

"I don't know. My partners knew, but they didn't tell me."

Garrett studied the boy, wondering if he was telling the truth. He said, "All right. You're a rustler, but only because you got in with the wrong men. If you want an honest job, you can work for me. You can make yourself useful around headquarters until I figure you're man enough for a riding job. What do you say?"

"I guess I have to do whatever you say, mister."

"And if you remember where the cattle were to be taken, I'll appreciate your telling me," Garrett said. "I've got to find Ed Reagan, son, before he ruins me. Come along. I'll take you to the bunkhouse."

From the bunkhouse, he crossed to the ranch house through the rain. He went directly to his bedroom, lighted the lamp, but Maria wasn't in the bed. It was still made up, and none of her things were in the room. He frowned and went to the bedroom across the hall. The door was closed—and locked.

His first impulse was to break it down. Then his anger went quickly and, telling himself that if she no longer wanted to sleep with him it was her privilege, he returned his own room.

Maria had had the devil in her from the time he'd found her at the sheep camp in the hills. . . .

THE door across the hall was open when he left his room in the morning, a bleak morning with rain still drumming against the windows. In the other room he found Maria partly dressed, before the mirror brushing her hair.

She saw him in the mirror, but did not turn.

"What ails you, *muchacha?*"

"Nothing. I am all right."

"But you want to sleep alone, eh?"

"I do not sleep with a man who has another woman."

"I told you I have no other woman," Garrett said. "And I'll be damned if I can see why you take Ed Reagan's word for it instead of mine."

"I know what I know."

"You've let Ed convince you of something that's not true."

"It's for you to prove it's not true, *Tejano.*"

Garrett swore, and said, "Prove it how?"

Maria continued to brush her hair, silent for a moment before she said, "I think you can prove it by taking me to Tombstone and showing the gringa that I am your woman and that you are not ashamed of me. You do that, and I will be the same to you as before—only more so."

"I've got no time to take you anywhere, *muchacha,*" he said. "There's trouble on the range. Ed Reagan has all the rustlers in the Territory running off my cattle. I —"

Maria cut in, "When you are ready to take me to Tombstone like I am important to you, then you may come into my room again. As for now—get out, *Tejano!*"

He got out.

After looking in on Eric Forsythe for a few minutes, Garrett went to the kitchen for breakfast. He was preoccupied, but not with thoughts of Maria. Her sulking annoyed him, but not enough for him to humor her.

He was disturbed about the rustling, for if the kid had told the truth, it was large scale rustling. Forty riders, the boy had said. If each of those forty had managed to run off twenty head of cattle, Ed Reagan had cost him eight hundred head in the past few nights. Old J. C. Wheeler of the Wagon Wheel had said small ranchers only go broke because of the rustling, and he thought, the big ones, too.

He wore a slicker when he left the house. The ranchyard was all mud puddles. He went to the cookshack and saw that the boy was eating breakfast with Charlie Harms and the hands.

He said, "Charlie, come over to the barn. You too, son."

The youth started to jump up from the table, but Garrett shook his head.

"When you're finished eating," he said, and headed for the barn.

He was saddling a horse when the boy

arrived at the barn. He asked, "You going to fit in here, Tom?"

"I reckon."

"It's a good outfit."

"Yes, sir."

"You want to tell me anything?"

Tom Dawson shook his head. "It's not that I don't want to, Mr. Garrett. I just don't know where we were to take the cattle. Like I told you, my partners knew, but they didn't tell me." He was silent a moment, hanging his head. "Maybe they didn't trust me." He looked up. "It's important for you to find out?'

"I want my cattle back," Garrett said. "But even more I want to catch Ed Reagan. He's got a hideout somewhere, and that's where the cattle are being taken. But if you don't know, you don't know."

Charlie Harms came in, grumbling, "Nice weather for ducks."

"Nice for rustlers, too," Garrett said. "But no cowman ever complains about it raining, Charlie. Tom here, he's on the pay-roll. You make a hand of him, eh, Charlie?"

"I can try."

"Make it a good try," Garrett said, mounted and rode out.

RAIN fell steadily, and Halfway Creek was overflowing its banks when Garrett forded it. He arrived at the line camp just as Pete Sarbo and two other hands rode in. They led their horses into the barn and off-saddled. Sarbo said, "You were right about the *bandidos,* Boss. There's no fight in them today."

"They're moving out?"

"Like a ragtag army after losing a battle," Sarbo said. "That pretty-boy, Garcia, hoofed it over here first thing this morning and offered to quit our range if we'd give their outfit their horses. I told him if the lot of them weren't heading out by foot within an hour, we'd shoot up their camp. They headed out. They'll be out of the valley before dark. I sent a half-dozen of our riders to gather up those Mex horses and drive them down to Sonora. I figured you wouldn't want to keep them."

Garrett nodded. "Good."

They walked over to the adobe bunkhouse, where a dozen hands were loafing. Garrett filled a tin cup from a big coffee pot in the fireplace.

Sarbo asked, "You get anything out of that kid rustler?"

"Nothing worthwhile except that Reagan's got forty riders in his bunch."

"Lord! They'll steal us blind!"

"He's smart, that Reagan. Smarter than I figured him."

"What are we going to do about him?"

Garrett shook his head. "Swallow it, for the time being," he said. "They've made a clean sweep and got away with the raid because of the storm. They've already got the cattle out of our reach, and Reagan's having a good laugh at my expense. But he'll send the men back once they've delivered the cattle to a safe place. And then, damn it, we won't swallow it!"

When Garrett got to headquarters after dark, it was no longer raining. The moon was bright and the sky studded with stars. Charlie Harms came from the bunkhouse, complaining:

"That kid, Boss. He hightailed as soon as

BAA BAA ZOOM!

LIVING near the shores of the Great Salt Lake in Utah is the only known sheepman who tends his flocks from an airplane. He got the idea for his one-man aerial lift to feed sheep three years ago when the government aided sheepmen with Operation Haylift because of the severe winter.

After taking flying lessons, he installed a hopper in a two-seated Cub plane. The pilot can push a lever and release concentrated food pellets to the sheep below. In only 45 minutes, this enterprising man can feed 1000 head of sheep on Fremont Island in Great Salt Lake, where high water fences in the sheep and fences out coyotes.

—Harold Helfer

I turned my back."

Garrett felt a sharp disappointment. "Well, live and learn. I thought I was doing him a good turn."

"Good riddance, I'd say," growled Sarbo.

"Well, forget him," Garrett said. "Put up my horse, Charlie?"

He went into the house and found Eric Forsythe and Maria in the parlor. The Englishman sat by the fire with a book, the girl was at a table playing solitaire. Forsythe looked up and smiled, but Maria remained intent upon her game.

"Good to see you up, Eric," Garrett said. "Maria, you still on your high horse?"

Maria looked up and said, *"Tejano!"* She made it sound like an obscenity.

Forsythe said, "How are things on the range, John?"

"Bad."

"Out of hand, eh?"

"For the time being."

Maria was scornful. "That Ed Reagan," she said. "He is too smart for you, *Tejano*. Like he said, he will strip your range clean of cattle. You will see!"

XIV

POURING two stiff drinks, Garrett smiled wryly when Forsythe cocked an inquiring eye at him. He said, "All right. So whisky don't solve anything. You don't have to say it."

He picked up his glass and didn't set it down until it was nearly empty. Forsythe sat nursing his drink, a look of concern on his lean face.

They were in the small room across the hall from the parlor, the room that Garrett used as his office. It was a night three months after the beginning of the rustler raids on the San Alejandro Ranch, three months since Maria had made her prophecy that Ed Reagan would strip the range clean of cattle.

Garrett said, "I noticed myself in the mirror when I shaved this morning, Eric. Hell, there's gray in my hair and lines in my face. I'm beginning to look like an old man—at forty."

"You need a rest, old man."

"Yeah. But what I need and what I can have are two different things."

"How bad is the situation, John?"

"So bad that if it doesn't get better I'll be ruined," Garrett said. "I'm just about whipped—and by a lobo like Ed Reagan!"

He halted by the fireplace, stared frowningly into the flames of the log fire. He'd told the truth. His hair was brushed with gray at the temples and his face was haggard. He was gaunt and there was a tired stoop to his shoulders. He was spending too much time in the saddle, sleeping too little and eating only enough to keep going.

There had been no real let-up in the rustling. He and his crew were incapable of coping with the thieves. The size of the range was a factor in their failure. The Monteros grant which he held under lease consisted of nearly seventy-five thousand acres. Shooting off from this vast range were small valleys and canyons into which cattle drifted, and these added perhaps twenty-five thousand more acres to be guarded. It was too huge a range to protect, no matter what methods were utilized.

Garrett had established three more line camps at strategic points, and the men rode the range at night with Winchesters across their saddles. Each line camp group patrolled a wide stretch of range, and Garrett himself, with another group, worked out of headquarters.

And still the thieves raided.

They were not successful in every raid, of course. Often they were intercepted, and there were frequent gunfights. Seven rustlers lay buried at various spots on the San Alejandro range, while two ranch hands, Mel Tolbert and Felipe Guzman, had been laid to rest beside Juan Robles. Time and again Garrett trailed bunches of stolen cattle into the mountains. He never returned empty-handed, but not once was he able to take a prisoner who might be forced to lead him to Ed Reagan.

Reagan had hit upon a sure-fire scheme. He sent his thieves out in small groups—mostly in pairs—and each group ran off only a few cattle. But some nights there would be a dozen groups raiding, and the total of stolen cattle sizable. There was sel-

dom a night when at least one group was not active.

Reagan, devilishly clever, saw to it that the raids took place at widely separated parts of the range on succeeding nights. Sometimes it was far south, then again north of ranch headquarters. Sometimes cattle were taken from the east part of the range, sometimes from the west.

And Reagan had primed his men to watch their back-trail. They abandoned the cattle and disappeared whenever Garrett or some of his men followed their tracks.

During the three months, the San Alejandro Ranch had received delivery on two trail herds—one from Texas and one from Sonora. These cattle had to be thrown onto the range to find grass and water. So as the original herd was depleted, the rustlers found this new stock and continued their depredations.

But the loss of the cattle from the range was not the whole picture. Garrett was forced to curtail his other activities in his futile attempt to guard the range. He dared not break off the fight long enough to make deliveries on contracts for beef or to go on buying trips, for fear that in his absence Reagan would make some bold and ruinous raid upon the ranch. And the buying and selling of cattle, as well as the raising of cattle, had been an important part of the operation of the ranch.

SO ED REAGAN was not only stealing Garrett's cattle, but also keeping him from doing business that would insure the financial prosperity of the ranch. A cowman might reckon his wealth in the number of cattle he had on the range, but he needed to be a businessman too, for in the final analysis his real worth had to be figured in hard cash.

Even now a matter of money required his attention, yet he dared not leave the ranch to take care of it. He turned from the fire to face Forsythe, his face as worried as it was tired

"How would you like to take a trip to Tucson?"

"I'll do anything I can to help, John. You know that."

Garrett nodded. "The lease fee on the ranch is due on the first of the month. I've got to get the money to Juan Monteros, but I don't feel as though I can leave here." He pointed to a wallet on his desk. "There it is, seventy-five hundred dollars. I don't think there's too much danger of road agents jumping you, but it'd be better to take somebody with you."

"How about Charlie Harms?"

"You couldn't pick a better man."

"When shall we leave?"

"In the morning," Garrett said. He buckled on his gun-rig, picked up his hat. He smiled wryly. "Here's hoping it's not the last time I'm able to pay the lease fee."

He glanced into the parlor as he crossed the hall. He saw Maria, but had no word for her and she pretended not to notice him. Maria had not backed down from the terms she had given him three months before, and they lived now as strangers. It was not a situation that Garrett liked, but he was too troubled and too tired to feel any need for her, and Maria was not the sort of woman to comfort a man.

The hands who rode with him from headquarters each night were waiting by the corral, Charlie Harms with them.

Garrett said, "Charlie, you're to go to Tucson with Forsythe in the morning."

Harms said, with evident relief, "Sure, Boss."

The others rose dispiritedly to saddle, and Garrett, also mounting, knew that each envied Charlie his trip to Tucson. They would have welcomed any change from riding the range from dusk to dawn. And John Garrett did not blame them. . . .

Forsythe and Harms were gone nearly a week, getting back late on a Sunday afternoon. Garrett crossed to the corral where they dismounted.

"Any trouble, Eric?" he asked.

"None at all. A pleasant trip, rather." Forsythe handed Garrett Monteros's receipt. "Yes, it was a pleasant trip, but a strange thing happened in Tombstone. I'd better let Charlie tell it. It happened to him."

Garrett looked at Harms. "What happened, Charlie?"

Old Charlie answered, "You remember that kid rustler you caught, Boss? Tom—"

"Tom Dawson. Sure, I remember him. Why?"

"Well, Forsythe and I put our horses up at the OK Corral when we got to Tombstone," Harms said. "We took the stage to Benson, then the train to Tucson. When we got back and went to get our horses this kid was hanging around the OK Corral. He's got a game leg now, and gets around on crutches. He had a knapsack hanging around his neck, and he was selling stuff—pencils, writing-paper, soap, shoe-laces. Only he didn't try to sell me anything."

"He probably recognized you, Charlie."

"He did, all right." Harms was looking puzzled. "I don't know what to make of it, Boss. He came up to me on his crutches like he wanted me to buy something, but he said, 'Charlie, tell Mr. Garrett to come see me. I can tell him what he wants to know now.' Then he went hobbling away fast."

Garret frowned. "That's all?"

Harms shrugged. "I started after him, but he looked back and shook his head. With a scared look on his skinny face. I savvied then that he didn't want to be seen talking to me. Like always, there were a lot of hombres hanging around the stable. Me, I don't know what to make of it, but Forsythe says you would."

GARRETT nodded. "When I had the boy here, I tried to get him to tell where the stolen cattle ended up, and where I could find Ed Reagan. He didn't know. It looks as though he knows now, and is willing to talk."

"Boss, I wouldn't trust that kid as far as I could throw him with one hand."

"I'll have to take a chance on him, Charlie."

"You say the word, and I'll go back to Tombstone and bring him out here."

Garrett shook his head. "That would let the cat out of the bag, Charlie. If the boy left Tombstone with you, word of it would get to Ed Reagan and that damn rustler would see to it that nothing I learned would do me any good. No, I've got to see the boy, without anyone in Tombstone knowing about it."

Charlie said, "Well, you're the boss," and turned away.

Forsythe walked to the house with Garrett. They went into Garrett's office, and the Englishman said, "There is a chance that Charlie is right, John."

"I've got to gamble that he's wrong," Garrett said. "If it's a trick of Ed Reagan's to bait me into a bushwhack trap, I'll know it when I talk to the boy. But I can't see Reagan going to the bother right now. He's too busy turning the cattle his men are stealing from me into money."

"But he still hasn't got Maria away from you. And he can't have quit hating you." Forsythe filled and lighted his pipe. "The logical thing to assume is that the Reagan crowd will take your life if you drop your guard. But I'm inclined to think that the Dawson boy is hard up because he's crippled and thinks he can sell you the information you want. I'd see him, but I'd only venture into Tombstone with enough of my men to assure my getting safely home again."

"If I take a bunch of men with me, the Reagans will know I'm up to something, and I'll be watched every minute," Garrett said. "I'd get no chance to talk to the boy. I'll make this look like a pleasure trip, Eric."

"A pleasure trip?"

"Yes. I'll take Maria with me."

Forsythe smiled. "That'll please her, at least," he said. "I won't argue, since obviously your mind is made up. But don't forget for a minute that you'll be a marked man from the moment you show yourself in Tombstone."

Two days later, traveling by buckboard, Garrett reached Tombstone late in the afternoon. Since his last visit, the town had grown enormously and was now a small, bustling metropolis. He stopped at the Belle Union Hotel to establish Maria in a hotel room, registering, "Mr. & Mrs. John Garrett, San Alejandro Ranch."

He felt a bit guilty even though in Tombstone there would be no lifting of eyebrows or questions. He took Maria and her luggage up to their room.

The girl's mood had changed, and she had been in the best of spirits during the long trip from the ranch. She came into Garrett's arms without his seeking her.

"Now you are being nice, *Tejano,*" she

said. "You will give your Maria money to do some shopping, no?"

He gave her five hundred dollars.

Maria kissed him. "I will buy some pretty clothes so that you will think I am beautiful."

"All right," he said. "I'll be back in time to take you to supper."

He went to the livery stable to put up his team, then lighted a cigar and strolled along Allen Street. He saw nothing of young Tom Dawson. He did catch sight of someone on crutches, but it was an older man.

He tried Tough Nut Street, without any better luck. A new courthouse had been built on Tough Nut, and Garrett met Deputy Sheriff Al Rumans coming from it. Rumans gave him one of his familiar half-smiles.

"I see you're still hale and hearty," he said. "Which means you took my advice the last time I saw you and didn't take the road through the Dragoons on your way home."

"I can take sound advice, Al."

"I hear you're having a little trouble out San Alejandro way."

"A little? You're not very well informed, friend."

"If it's serious, you'd better talk to the sheriff."

"Would that do any good, Al?"

RUMANS took out makings and started building a smoke, smiling and saying nothing. When he'd lighted his cigarette, he said, "You're the one man I thought could make things hot for the Ring. It's beginning to look as though I was wrong. The rustlers too tough for you and your Texans, Garrett?"

"Not too tough," Garrett said. "Too smart."

He wondered just how honest Al Rumans was. But since the deputy had warned him about the planned bushwhack on his last visit to Tombstone he decided he could trust him.

He said, "Al, I'm looking for a kid named Tom Dawson. He's got a bum leg and gets around on crutches. Maybe you've seen him around."

"Yeah. He goes around pestering folks to buy some junk he peddles." Rumans gave him a curious look. "You want to see him?"

"Yes. Without anybody knowing about it."

"It's important, eh?"

"Along with that warning you gave me some months ago, it might be worth, say, fifty dollars to me to talk with him."

Rumans smiled. "Keep your money handy," he said. "I'll have a look around. Where are you staying?"

"At the Belle Union."

"I'll see you," Rumans said, and went his way.

XV

DEPUTY Rumans came to the Belle Union while Garrett was having supper with Maria in the hotel dining room. The deputy stopped by their table, hat in hand, and said, "Mind if I join you folks a minute or two?" He took a chair before Garrett could reply.

Garrett said, "Will you have something, Al? Coffee?"

"No, thanks. I've got one of my errands to run. You know me—always busy."

"Well, if you're in a hurry—" Garrett got out his wallet and handed fifty dollars to Rumans. "Where and when, Al?"

"South out Fifth Street," Rumans said. "There's a lot of shacks, but you go to the last one on the street. A tarpaper shack. Go any time tonight." He pushed back his chair, rose. "Thanks for the fifty."

Maria watched him leave, then said, "What's this?"

"I've got to see somebody."

"So you came to Tombstone to do business, not to please me?" Her voice was sharp with threatening anger. "I do not like this, I think."

Garrett smiled at her. She was wearing a new dress and looked lovely.

He said, "I can't buy you things if I don't attend to business. This won't take long. When I get back, I'll take you to see the show at the Bird Cage."

"If I thought it was that *gringa*—"

"Don't be silly, Maria. I'm not going to see a woman."

"All right," she said, pouting. "But if

you lie to me, I will know. And—"

"No threats, Maria," he said. "There's no need to be at each other's throat. I'll go now and get back that much quicker."

It was full dark when he reached the street and began moving through the early evening throng along Allen's busy business district. At the intersection, he paused and looked about. So far as he could see, no one was paying him any attention. He turned south along Fifth, shortly crossed Tough Nut, and looked back again. Still no signs of anyone following him.

The farther along Fifth he went, the darker and quieter the street became, and finally it was merely a rutted road running past rickety shacks. Coming finally to the last sorry shelter he saw dim light leaking through the cracks. The door itself was tarpaper tacked to a frame.

"Tom?"

"That you, Mr. Garrett? Come on in."

The doorway was so low that Garrett had to duck his head. The interior seemed little larger than a closet. It was lighted by a lantern standing on a box. There was a small sheet-iron stove with a coffee pot on it. Tom Dawson's bed was a pallet on the floor. He was sitting on it, a tin cup in one hand and a chunk of bread in the other. His crutches lay beside him. He looked lean and seedy.

"Put the lantern on the floor, Mr. Garrett, and sit on the box."

"Thanks." When he was seated, Garrett said, "I got your message."

"You came in a hurry."

"It's important to me."

"I guess so. You want some coffee?"

Garrett said, "I've just had some. I'll smoke while you're eating." He puffed on his cigar and watched the youth wolf down his scanty supper.

"What happened to your leg, son?" he asked.

"I got shot. But I just say a horse fell on me."

"What happened?"

"Well, after I left your ranch I set out to find out what you wanted to know."

"You what?"

Tom Dawson grinned. "Sure, I know you thought I'd run back with the rustlers. I did, only not because I wanted to be in with them again. I thought about how decent you treated me, giving me a job and all, when you could have sent me to jail. So I went back to the rustler crowd to find out where the cattle they stole went and to find out where Ed Reagan's hide-out is. You said you had to find him or he'd ruin you. Remember?"

Garrett nodded. He was touched.

TOM went on, "Those partners of mine I told you about turned out to be no-goods. But I rode with them, and we ran off a lot of your cattle. We turned the cattle onto a range near Charleston, in the San Pedro Valley. A ranch owned by a man named Riordan. He paid us off, but my partners kept it all except for a few dollars they gave me once in a while. I didn't care, because I didn't want to be a cow thief. I was just sort of spying—"

"Riordan, you say? In the San Pedro Valley?"

"Yeah. You know that hombre?"

"No. But I've heard of him. I never heard that he was crooked, though."

"He's crooked as a dog's hind leg, Mr. Garrett," the boy said.

Garrett nodded. "Keep talking."

"The last time we took cattle to Riordan's ranch, Ed Reagan was there," Tom said. "My partners set out for Charleston to do some drinking. I told them I'd wait for them, but when Ed Reagan rode out, I followed him. When he took the Tombstone road it was getting dark, and I lost sight of him. I got too close and he heard me coming. He scared the wits out of me by hiding in some rocks off the road and yelling at me. I swung my horse around and hightailed it. He shot at me and his slug nicked me in the knee. I got away, though. Lucky I did, or he'd have killed me sure."

"What happened then, son?"

"I holed up with a miner a couple miles from Charleston. I gave him what money I had to take care of me. He was all right. He whittled these crutches for me. When I could travel again, I came on to Tombstone. But I didn't see anything of Ed

Reagan. My leg didn't get any better, so I sold my horse and saddle. I peddle stuff and make a little money, and I found this shack empty. I would have got word to you sooner, only I didn't know how. I can't read or write, or I'd have sent you a letter." The boy looked eagerly at Garrett. "This any help?"

"It's just what I needed to know, Tom."

"Even though I didn't find Ed Reagan's hide-out?"

"I'll find it now, myself, through this Riordan."

"I hope so," this boy said. Then, wistfully, "I sure wish my knee would get better. Maybe then I could go back to your ranch."

"You're going back," Garrett said, rising. "I'll send a man for you." He handed Tom some money. "You see a doctor tomorrow, eh?"

"Yes, sir. And you won't tell anybody that I—"

"No. I'll keep it to myself."

"There's a lot of tough hombres in this town, and if they found out—"

"They won't," Garrett said. "Good night, son."

He left the shack, headed back toward the center of town. He had crossed Tough Nut Street, turned toward Allen when he heard a voice exclaim, "That's him now!"

He swung around, saw three men staring at him with an intentness that could only mean that they had been searching for him. One said, "Yeah, that's Garrett!"

He realized his danger even before they drew, and reached inside his coat for his gun. They beat him to the draw, however, driving several shots at him. One hit him in the left side like the blow of a giant fist, staggering him. He recovered his balance, returned their fire. One went down, then the other two ducked back into Tough Nut Street.

He pushed back his coat, put a hand against his side and felt the swift, warm gushing blood. He saw the muzzle flash as a gun cut loose at him from the corner of a building at Tough Nut. He turned and ran, holding his hand against his wound. His strength was leaking from him as he ran into the deep shadows at the rear of the Cosmopolitan Hotel—and two more guns opened up behind him.

He ran on, his legs threatening to give way. He could hear men coming after him, running faster than he. He halted at the rear of the Bird Cage Theater, fired two shots at them and forced them to drop to the ground.

After a moment, one called, "We'll get you sooner or later, Garrett! A dozen men are gunning for you around town. Run, Garrett—run!"

HE RAN as best he could, keeping to the dark places until he found himself in a lot where there were a dozen or more freight wagons. He made his staggering way in among them, finally sagged against the wheel of one. He was gasping for breath, and with every breath there was a knife-thrust of pain in his side. After two or three minutes, two horsemen reined in at the far side of the wagonyard.

"See anything?" he heard one say. And the other, "Naw. But he can't have got far if they put a slug in him."

They rode on. Garrett had to holster his gun and hold onto the wheel with both hands to keep from sagging to the ground. His mind remained clear, and he realized that his only hope of escaping with his life lay in finding a place in which to hole up. He could think of only one sanctuary, and it a doubtful one. The little house on Third Street.

Claire Maury's house.

It took what seemed an eternity, but he made it. He reached Claire's house on the last of his ebbing strength by a circuitous route that took advantage of dark alleys and shadowy walls. Twice he was forced to hide while men apparently searching for him passed nearby. He approached the rear of the house, aware that, with Claire at the Alhambra, the doors would be locked and he would not be able to force an entrance from the front without being seen. He feared he would be seen there at the back of the house, but reached the back door without anyone raising an outcry or challenging him.

As he had anticipated, the door was

locked. But the door was a flimsy one. He gripped the knob for leverage, then lay his weight against the door and after a moment the pressure caused the lock to snap. He reeled into the dark kitchen as the door swung open. Recovering his balance, he closed the door but with the lock broken, it would not stay shut. He used a kitchen chair to hold it shut.

He could do no more.

He sank limply to the floor. He was lying there, close to unconsciousness, when Claire came home after two o'clock in the morning.

He was not wholly conscious throughout the rest of the night. Only dimly was he aware that Claire came, went away, came again with a man who must have been a doctor. He was moved from the floor; he was worked over he suffered pain. Then he had medicine forced down his throat, and finally lapsed into sleep that was only half sleep and full of nightmares. At dawn, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep and when he awoke it was full daylight.

He lay in her bed, in a room pleasantly feminine. It was dim, for the window blind was drawn and lace curtains diffused the light. There was an odor of carbolic, but through it he was aware of the provocative scent of perfume. Yes, it was her room and her bed.

Claire came to the doorway. "You're awake?"

He turned his head on the pillow, looked at her. "I've put you to a lot of bother. I've taken your bed."

"Why did you come here?"

"There was nowhere else for me to go. You were the only person I could think of, at the time."

"Your woman is at the Belle Union."

"Yes. But I wouldn't have got that far."

She came and stood beside the bed. "You're right. They tore the town apart looking for you. You came to the one place where you're safe. And it shouldn't be safe for you at all. You know that."

"I knew it would be safe," he said. "I was right. You didn't give me away. You could have brought those gunmen here instead of a doctor. Will he keep his mouth shut?"

"I paid him enough."

"You see?"

She frowned. "See what?"

"I was right in thinking you wouldn't give me away," he said. "I'm in love with you, and you know it—and it's not in you to let me be murdered. How bad is my wound, Claire?"

"Not too serious, according to the doctor. You lost a lot of blood, but the wound is merely a matter of torn flesh and cracked ribs. You'll live to hunt those men down and kill them."

"They're not that important," he told her. "It's the man or men who hired them I'm going to hunt down."

"And in the meantime?"

"That's up to you."

SHE said nothing.

He said, "If you bring them here to get me, I'll understand. If you don't, I'll only be able to say 'thanks.'" He was suddenly exhausted, spent by the effort talking required.

She left him, but returned almost at once with a bowl and a spoon. She sat on the edge of the bed and fed him warm beef broth. It warmed him, made him feel stronger. But it made him feel drowsy too, and soon he was asleep again.

It was night when he awoke. A dim light filled the room, from a lamp on the bureau. She stood beside him, and he had the feeling that she had touched him to awaken him. She was dressed in the gaudy clothing necessary for her job at the Alhambra. The big cameo brooch was pinned to the front of her dress.

"I've got to leave soon," she said. "You'd better eat a little now."

"All right."

She brought him more broth, and again fed it to him. She left him when the bowl was empty, then returned wearing a coat. She set a glass of water on the bedside table, looked at him expressionlessly.

"I'll be back some time after two," she said. "If anyone comes here, it won't be because I told them. Do you want me to send word to your woman?"

"No. It wouldn't be safe."

"She may be worrying."

"I doubt it."

"Do you want the lamp burning?"

"No. Better leave the house dark."

"You're scared, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am."

She nodded. "I'm glad to hear you say it. That proves you are at least a little human. You've a right to be scared. They're saying that you killed a man without reason, over at Tough Nut and Fifth Streets. They're saying that's what started this whole thing."

"Three of them opened fire on me. I fired back to save myself. Can you believe that?"

"Yes. I know the Ring set out to get you the moment you arrived in town. Now it's been twisted around so the blame lies with you. You can't expect the law to protect you—such law as there is. I don't know how you'll get away when you're able to leave." She extinguished the lamp, went to the door. "But don't worry about it. I'll find a way to get you out of town when the time comes."

She darkened the parlor, then was gone

And he lay there waiting for her. . . .

It was twenty minutes after two by the clock on the bedside table. Someone came with her, as far as the door. A man. Garrett heard his voice. They stood outside talking a little while, then the man was gone and Claire came in and lighted the lamp in the parlor. She threw off her coat and came to him. There was enough light from the other room to show him her face. She looked tired, and far from happy.

"You haven't slept?" she asked.

"I waited for you."

"You're a fool, John. You can wait the rest of your life and it will do you no good. You know that."

"Who was the man?"

"Jess Quartermane. He walks home with me often. If he doesn't, Matt Reagan does. Both are hard men to discourage. Each keeps hoping he'll one night get farther than that door. Do you want anything?"

"No. Where will you sleep?"

"In the parlor, on the sofa."

"I'm sorry. I won't stay any longer than necessary."

She smiled bleakly. "Don't let it bother you. It's not unpleasant to do for a man, even if the man is you." She was silent a moment. "The truth is, if I could love any man again it would be you, John Garrett. And I hate myself for that."

"When I leave, come with me, Claire."

"No," she said. "Good night."

IT WENT on like that, her manner toward him never changing. He grew stronger. He spent some of the time sitting in a rocking-chair that Claire moved into the bedroom from the parlor. She brought him his meals. She cared for his slowly healing wound.

Each night she went to the Alhambra to deal faro, and each night, when she returned a man accompanied her as far as her door. Either Jess Quartermane or Matt Reagan. Each night too she reported what she had heard from the two men or at the Alhambra. The search for him continued for a week, then one night Claire told him that it had ended.

"The whole town believes that you're lying dead somewhere," she said. "People think you got out of town and hid in some lonely place and died from your wound. They think that sooner or later your body will be found. They know you didn't get back to your ranch, or turn up at any town near Tombstone."

Garrett said, "That'll make it easier for me to get away."

"There's more. You won't like it."

"I'm alive and safe. Nothing else matters."

"Your woman," Claire said, "Ed Reagan came to town last night. They went to the Bird Cage Theater, and later he went to her hotel room. This morning she went off with him, with all her luggage. They drove off in your buckboard, with your team."

"It's all right."

"Is that all she means to you?"

"You know what Maria meant to me, Claire," he said. "It was a mistake for me to have taken her to the San Alejandro Ranch. Her going back to Reagan is better for me. And for her, so long as it lasts."

"What does that mean?"

"I know how to find him now."

She looked at him frowningly. "So you'll go after him when you're able," she said. "You haven't changed, not even after nearly dying."

"I will die if I don't get him," he said. "He'll see to that. He and Matt and all the rest of the Ring. Once they find out that I'm still alive, they'll be gunning for me again—and they'll never quit until they get me or I find a way to stop them. Haven't you seen enough of this town to understand now that I have no choice but to fight—that I never had any choice?"

"I don't know," Claire said tonelessly. "But I'm beginning to hate Tombstone as though it were—well, an enemy of mine. I've made up my mind to leave after you've gone back to your ranch." She saw his eager look. "No, not with you. Back East where I belong."

He started to argue, but realizing that nothing he could say would change her mind, he held his tongue.

On his tenth day in her house he told Claire he was well enough to leave. She seemed willing enough to have him go.

"I'll arrange to have a horse brought here at midnight."

"Just so you can trust the man you arrange it with."

"I have it all planned. His name is Givens and he's hard up. He lost all his money at the Alhambra. You don't need to worry about him."

"What about you?"

"I'll return East. But that doesn't concern you."

"Give me your address there."

"I don't know what it will be."

"Then write to me, when you get settled—"

"No," she said. "I want to forget you, if I can. Once I'm away from Arizona, I don't even want any memory of you."

She was as unemotional when she left for the Alhambra that night as she'd been during the whole ten days. She merely said, "I suppose not," when he asked if they would see each other again. She went from the house without saying good-by or wishing him luck.

She left John Garrett feeling entirely alone in the world.

XVI

BY ELEVEN o'clock, with an hour still to go, Garrett had his gun-rig buckled on and wore his hat and coat. He had shaved with a razor Claire had smuggled out of the Alhambra for him to use, had washed up and donned the clean shirt she had washed and ironed for him herself. There was still shakiness in him, but he was suddenly restless, eager to have a horse between his knees and the trail to the Alejandro Ranch stretching ahead of him.

At the same time, he was reluctant to leave this house, since leaving meant that he would never see Claire again. He tried to tell himself that it was merely the end of an intolerable situation he would never be able to change. Claire would never be anything to the man who had killed her husband. That was an insurmountable barrier, stronger than any feeling she might have for him.

He was certain that, in spite of herself, she no longer hated him. Indeed, she had admitted that if she could love again it would be him, an admission all the more convincing because it had been unemotional. He did not doubt she could love again, despite the memory of her husband.

Claire was not free and easy with her affections as was Maria, but Garrett believed she could be far more generous and demanding in love than the Mexican girl. Maria gave freely, but bestowed little. There were great depths of passion in Claire, but she must love and be loved before a man could probe beneath her surface reserve.

But it was not enough for him to love her and believe she loved him. More was required. A miracle. For he could not undo the fact that he had killed a man called Dude and that that man had been Ben Maury, her husband.

He waited in the dark, and finally struck a match to look at his watch. It was ten minutes past twelve, and Claire had said that the horse was to be brought promptly at midnight. He peered from the window, saw nothing. The neighboring houses were

dark and no one was moving along the street. His restlessness increased. If he had to leave, he wanted to be on his way.

At twelve-thirty he began to worry. What if the man with whom Claire had made her arrangements didn't show up?

He remained by the window for perhaps another hour. Finally, he considered setting out on the chance that he would be able to obtain a mount on his own without being spotted by any of the rustler ring. He owed it to Claire to leave. The longer he stayed in her house, the longer she would have to delay her departure from Tombstone. He decided to take the risk. But upon opening the door, he heard someone coming along the street. He stepped back, closed the door, and heard voices. Claire's—and, he was sure, Jess Quartermane's.

Since she was home earlier than usual, he imagined it was because she knew the horse hadn't been brought to him, that something had gone wrong. He moved away from the door, went into the bedroom. The door opened, and he heard Claire say sharply, "Now, Jess—please!"

The door slammed shut, but not on Quartermane. Tonight he'd come into the house, and now his deep voice seemed to fill it.

"Come off it," he was saying. "A showdown is past due between you and me."

Something had gone wrong, indeed.

Garrett pushed back his coat and laid his hand on his gun.

A match flame blossomed in the parlor, and John Garrett moved deeper into the bedroom where the glow of the lamp that was to be lighted wouldn't reach him, but he faced the doorway. He saw Quartermane light the parlor lamp, saw the man look around, and heard him say:

"Cozy. But not half good enough for you, my dear."

Quartermane put his hat on the table and lighted a cigar, smiling.

Claire said, "Jess, I'm not asking—I'm telling you to go." Her voice gave her away. She was frightened.

QUARTERMANE stood at ease by the table, smiling at her. He was wearing a new-looking gray broadcloth suit and was freshly barbered. He cut a fine figure, and seemed aware of it. The sheriff appeared to feel good tonight.

He said, "What are you afraid of?"

"There'll be trouble if Matt Reagan finds out about this," Claire told him. "You know that."

"To hell with Matt Reagan," Quartermane said. "I've made up my mind to break him, if he's what's keeping you from being nice to me. Sure, he wants you. But he hasn't got you." He puffed on his cigar, watching her closely. "Claire, this living alone is no good for you. No matter what you think."

Claire's glance sought the bedroom doorway, telling Garrett that she knew he was still there. She looked back at Quartermane, and said, "Jess, give me a little time to think it over. Until tomorrow night."

He laid his cigar on the edge of the table, moved toward her. "I'll make up your mind for you now, tonight. If you think you need to make a choice between Matt and me, forget it. I've lived like a monk ever since I first met you. But Matt hasn't. I'm the one who deserves you and, damn it, I'm the one who's going to have you!"

He took her in his arms, rough about it.

Garrett heard Claire cry, "Jess—no!" and could take no more.

His gun was in his hand when he stepped into the parlor, and he was crazy mad enough to kill Jess Quartermane. The sheriff sensed that he and Claire were not alone and, releasing her, he swung around. Shock came to his face.

"You!" he said thickly. And then, in an outraged voice, "My God, she's been hiding you!"

Only jealous rage could have caused the man to be so foolish as to grab for his own gun when covered by Garrett's. Or he could have feared he was to be murdered, so tried desperately to save himself. Garrett's first impulse was to shoot him, but then he leaped forward and clubbed down with his gun. The barrel of the Colt caught Quartermane at the left temple, with such force that he was knocked against the wall and dropped heavily to the floor.

Garrett holstered his gun, crossed to the

fallen man. The sheriff was unconscious. He used Quartermane's own belt to bind his hands at his back, and his own handkerchief to gag him. He rose and went into the bedroom, returned with one of Claire's scarves and tied the sheriff's ankles together. He saw Claire's pallor, her frightened eyes.

"You'll have to leave with me," he said. "And we'll have to get away from this town tonight."

She nodded jerkily. "I'd made up my mind to go with you. I—"

He crossed to her, caught her by the arms. "You mean it?"

"Yes. That's why the horse wasn't brought to you. After I left here tonight, I—I turned weak, John. It's wrong, but I want to be with you. There's a buckboard coming shortly. I came home early to pack and— Oh, John, why did this have to happen?"

"Don't let it bother you. How soon will the rig get here?"

"I told Givens to come at two."

"There's not much time, so get packed."

He helped her, and they didn't bother to pack neatly. Placing her clothes in the trunk in a haphazard fashion, Garrett felt buoyant of spirit. It was as though the years had fallen away from him, and he was young and eager again. He glanced at Claire and smiled as she brought the contents of a bureau drawer to the trunk, and said, to wipe away her troubled look, "Don't worry. We'll make it."

He was buckling the straps of the trunk when the front door opened. Thinking it was Givens, he went to the parlor. It was Matt Reagan!

Reagan kicked the door shut, his gaze jumping from the bound and gagged Jess Quartermane to Garrett. Then he swore and drew a derringer pistol from his vest pocket, cocking it as he aimed at Garrett.

Claire came from the bedroom, saying, "John, what's wrong?" She cried out, seeing Reagan, "Oh, no!"

Reagan's ruddy face was brick-red with rage. He swore, and said, "I figured you were up to something when you left early, baby, but I expected to find you and Jess—not this! You have the devil's own luck, Garrett. Like everybody else, I thought you were dead. I should have known better."

THERE was a *clopping* of hoofs and a creak of wheels outside.

Garrett saw that Reagan heard the rig, saw a quick uneasiness in the big man's eyes. He said, "Some of my men, Matt. So don't pull something that will get you killed. You've got only two shots with that derringer, and three of my men are out there. Put it away, man!"

The rig had stopped before the house. Reagan's face showed his indecision. There was a knock on the door. Garrett pushed Claire back into the bedroom. The door opened, and a seedy old man stood on the threshold. Reagan swore bitterly as he realized that Garrett had tricked him. He gave the door a violent shove, slamming it against old Givens, then looked back at Garrett.

Garrett had had time to draw his gun.

The room seemed to rock with the blast of shots, and powder-smoke hung thick in the air. Reagan had fired both barrels of the derringer, but each shot went wild. Garrett's one shot had found its mark. Matt Reagan tumbled to the floor and sprawled there lifelessly. Garrett crossed the room, jerked open the door. Givens stood just outside, his wrinkled face a mask of fright.

"Give me a hand with this stuff," Garrett said, and took the man by the arm to pull him inside.

They carried Claire's baggage out to the buckboard, Garrett looking about the street to see if the gunshots had awakened the neighborhood. He was fearful that an alarm would be spread before he and Claire could get out of town. But no lamps were lighted in any of the houses, no voice called out to ask what was going on.

He went back into the house. Claire stood in the bedroom, her face as pale as death. She was trembling violently when he took her arm.

"Come along," he said. "It's nearly over now."

She came with him, moving like a sleepwalker or a person in a trance. As they crossed the parlor a sound came from the now conscious Jess Quartermane. The man

had slipped his gag, somehow, and he said hoarsely, "Garrett, you won't keep her. There's something I know that you don't. Listen—"

Garrett ignored him.

He closed the door, helped Claire into the buckboard, and went around to the driver's side.

Old Givens tagging along, said, "How about my money? Cameo promised me fifty dollars and—"

"Come along," Garrett cut in. "I'll pay you when we're clear of town."

He untied the reins from the whipstock, waited until the man had climbed to the rear seat, then reached for the whip and used it on the horses. "Come on—come on!"

He ran them out Third Street, away from Tombstone.

After perhaps a mile, he reined in the team and paid Givens. "You can walk back from here," he said. "You'd better look up Deputy Sheriff Al Rumans and tell him to go around to that house. But don't be in any hurry about it."

The old man said, "Sure. I savvy."

He climbed down and started walking slowly back toward Tombstone. Garrett didn't drive on immediately. He took Claire in his arms.

"You're all right?"

"Yes. John—"

"Don't think about what happened. It was Matt or me. I had no choice."

"I understand," Claire said. "But I'm frightened, John. Jess will come after us. He won't come alone, either. I don't see how we can get to your ranch without him overtaking us."

"We can't," he said. "I don't intend to try. Once Givens is far enough away so he can't tell which way we head, I'm going the opposite way. Let Quartermane look for us along the road to San Alejandro Valley. I have a friend in Tucson, and we'll try to reach his place." He added, "And we'll be married in Tucson. All right?"

"Yes—"

He detected doubt in her voice, and so asked, "It's what you want, isn't it, Claire?"

She clung to him. "Yes, John—oh, yes!"

He held her close a moment longer, then started out again.

XVII

ON THE evening of the day Garrett and Claire arrived in Tucson, they were married in Juan Moñteros's house, the arrangements having been made by their host, and the ceremony performed by a justice of the peace named de Baca. The brief ceremony over, John Garrett smiled at his wife, content. For the time being, even the threat of ruin for the San Alejandro Ranch was unimportant.

Monteros and his housekeeper, Senora Gonzales, were the witnesses. They and de Baca drank a toast to the newlyweds, then the senora went off to the kitchen and de Baca departed with his fee. Monteros, who was letting Garrett and his wife have the use of his house for a few days, left for a cantina where, he'd assured them, he would drink to their happiness again. Senor Monteros, himself, was a confirmed bachelor.

Alone with Claire, Garrett poured wine. He gave one glass to his bride, then sat beside her on the sofa before the fireplace. It was pleasant in Senor Monteros's parlor, cozy with the flickering light of the log fire and the soft glow of the candles about the room. He clasped Claire's left hand in his right, looked at her gravely.

"To us," he said. "May our marriage be a good one, darling."

They touched glasses, and drank.

His own mind was closed to what had happened in Tombstone, at the house on Third Street, and he refused to consider that Quartermane might still be searching for them. For tonight at least, he did not want to think of trouble with the man, with the dead Matt Reagan's friends, or of the near-disaster in San Alejandro Valley. He was a newly married man tonight, and he wanted nothing to interfere.

But he was concerned about Claire. She was pale, and there was a troubled look in her eyes. He took it for granted that she was unable to forget what had happened two nights ago in her house.

He patted her hand. "Drink up," he urged. "This is mission wine, and it's right

for a wedding night."

When she emptied her glass, he refilled it. And finally a flush came into her cheeks and brightness to her eyes. When the fire had burned to embers, he rose and drew Claire to her feet. He held her close for a moment, and said, "You'll want a little while?"

She whispered, "Yes, please," and went to the bedroom.

He poured himself another drink. He downed the wine without savoring its taste but wanting the glow of it in him. He moved about the room, snuffing out the candles, then stood by the fireplace and puffed on his cigar. He waited until it was short, then went to the bedroom, knocking lightly. He opened the door and found Claire standing by the bed with a frozen look on her face, and despair in her eyes. She wore a wrapper over her nightgown. He went to her, slipped his arms about her. She grew rigid.

"What's wrong, darling?"

"I—I don't know."

"You thinking of Quartermane and Reagan?"

"No. It's not that."

He was puzzled, troubled. "Look, you're not thinking of Maria and me?"

She shook her head. "No, John. I understand about that. It's— Well, it's the other thing. I can't stop thinking about that. It makes me freeze up inside. I feel that you and I had no right to marry."

"Your husband. Your dead husband. God, you're not going to let him come between us?" Anger gripped him. He caught her by the shoulders, turned her toward him. "You can't stop thinking that I killed him?"

"I'm sorry, John." She was crying. "I thought it was over, but I can't help myself. And for you and I— Well, it seems wrong, immoral!"

His anger turned to despair. He removed his hands from her and said, "All right. I'll wait. I understand how it is with you." He went to the door, and added from there, "I hope in time you understand how it is with me."

He left the room, closing the door behind him. . . .

DEPUTY SHERIFF AL RUMANS sat in the sheriff's office in Tombstone's new courthouse building, idly looking through a week-old copy of *The Arizona Star*. His interest suddenly sharpened as his gaze halted on an item headed:

MARRIED YESTERDAY EVENING

Rumans's attention had been caught by the names—John Garrett and Claire Maury. He muttered, "I'll be damned!" Then, chuckling, he folded the newspaper and left the office.

He found Jess Quartermane drinking alone at a table in the barroom of the late Matt Reagan's Alhambra, a business that Quartermane had taken over after resigning —while too drunk to know what he was doing, Rumans suspected—as sheriff of Cochise County. He laid the newspaper in front of Quartermane.

"What's this?" Quartermane's voice was harsh.

"A Tucson newspaper," Rumans said. He pointed to the item. "Take a look."

Quartermane bent over the paper, trying to focus his vision. He was a little drunk. It took him some minutes to make sense of the printed words. When he finished reading, he did not fly into a rage as Rumans had anticipated. He leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigar.

Rumans needled him, "There's no keeping that Texan down, eh?"

Quartermane looked suddenly sober. He said, "Thanks, Al. This is more than I'd hoped for, his marrying the woman." He called to a man over at the bar, "Blackie, come here."

Blackie sauntered over to the table, a tough-looking youth with a tied-down gun holster. He talked around a cigarette. "Something you want, Jess?"

"Take a trip over to Tucson, Blackie," Quartermane said, reaching into his pocket, then throwing some money onto the table. "Get in touch with some of the smugglers that come there from across the Border. Find a gringo called El Gitano—the sly one. Tell him I want to see him, that I've got a big deal for him. A big enough deal to make

him forget about smuggling Mex silver across the Border. Get going, Blackie."

Blackie picked up the money and got going.

Al Rumans looked puzzled. "What's all this? Trouble for Garrett?"

Quartermane laughed. "Trouble for Garrett is right," he said.

Rumans stood there, not feeling good about having shown the newspaper to the ex-sheriff. . . .

If Juan Monteros noticed that all was not well between John Garrett and his wife, he was too discreet to show it. When Garrett told him of the situation at the San Alejandro Ranch and of his plan to force a showdown with the rustler ring by striking at the rancher named Riordan, Monteros urged him to make Tucson his temporary headquarters. He pointed out that it might turn out to be more profitable to strike from Tucson than from the ranch, since the rustlers would be less likely to learn of his movements.

Monteros found a trustworthy man, a vaquero from a ranch in which he had an interest, and the vaquero carried a letter to Eric Forsythe at the San Alejandro Ranch. When he returned with a reply, Garrett sent him to Tombstone with a message for Deputy United States Marshal Dan Wyatt.

When Forsythe arrived in Tucson he revealed that word of Garrett's supposed death had reached the ranch, but that he had "taken the news with the proverbial grain of salt." He had not been surprised when the more recent news that John Garrett was alive reached him. He showed no surprise when Garrett introduced Claire as Mrs. Garrett

He said, "Congratulations are indeed in order, John." And to Claire, "It will be pleasant having you at the ranch."

For a moment Garrett feared she would say that she was not going to the ranch with him, but Claire smiled and said, "I'm sure it will be pleasant for me."

To Garrett's inquiry regarding the situation in San Alejandro Valley, the Englishman said, "You are still losing cattle regularly. But your letter said you've found a way to strike back at the rustlers."

Garrett nodded. "A rancher named Riordan in San Pedro Valley gets delivery of the stolen cattle and pays the rustlers for Ed Reagan. My plan is to take him, and through him get Reagan. You've brought some of my hands with you?"

"Ten. They're camped outside Tucson."

"I'll come out there as soon as Dan Wyatt gets here from Tombstone."

THE deputy marshal arrived by train that afternoon, coming directly to the Monteros house. He was acquainted with Monteros, and of course knew Claire.

After greetings were exchanged, he said, "John, in your letter you said you think you have a way to take Ed Reagan."

Garrett explained about Riordan's being a member of the rustler ring.

Wyatt said, "This is only halfway a surprise. Riordan puts up a good show of being an honest cattleman, but he's too prosperous for the size of his outfit. When he hits Tombstone, he does the town high, wide and handsome, and doesn't bother about the cost. When do we drop in on him?"

"I'd like to get started now."

They got horses at a livery stable and rode from Tucson as it grew dark. Forsythe had given Garrett the location of the JG Connected camp, about a mile outside of town.

Wyatt said, "If we should be lucky enough to nab Ed, we'll have the Ring broken. It's already cracked, due to Matt Reagan's death."

"How did Tombstone take his death?"

"As it takes most killings. Jess Quartermane tried to call it murder, but Al Rumans and I were the first ones into the house. Al asked me to go with him after old Givens tipped him off. We found Quartermane tied up and Reagan dead, with his fired derringer beside him. We pointed out to Quartermane that the evidence proved you'd killed Reagan in a fair gunfight. That was hard for him to swallow, but—well, he got it down."

"He didn't try to overtake Claire and me?"

"He ran himself ragged trying," Wyatt said. "When he came back empty-handed, he went on a three-day drunk. Before he

sobered up, he'd resigned as sheriff and taken over Matt's Alhambra."

"And Matt's place in the Ring?"

"I don't know about that," Wyatt said. "But if we take Ed Reagan, there won't be any Ring left. The Reagans have held it together."

They reached the camp shortly. Old Charlie Harms was among the men there. Garrett shook hands with Harms and the others, then said, "Saddle up, boys. We're riding out."

By dawn they were within easy striking distance of Riordan's ranch headquarters, but Garrett decided to hold off until nightfall, hoping to take the man by surprise. The approach of a band of strange riders would cause a man as guilty as Riordan to make a run for it.

They went into camp about five miles from the ranch headquarters and loafed the day away. They ate supper at sundown, then as darkness came, they saddled up, mounted, and rode slowly toward their destination.

Wyatt knew the place, and led the way. They were undiscovered until Charlie Harms and the other San Alejandro Ranch hands were deployed about the place. At least, no one challenged until Garrett, Wyatt and Forsythe were close to the buildings.

Then a man called, "Who's out there?"

Wyatt gave his name. "Just passing by, Riordan. Thought my friends and I would drop in on you for a minute."

Riordan's reply was reluctant. "Well, all right."

He stood in the lighted doorway of his adobe house. Opposite it was a large bunkhouse, lighted, and with door open. Half a dozen men were in the bunkhouse.

Riordan, a big, rough-looking man with a stubby black beard, seemed uneasy. "Hunting a road agent again, Marshal?"

"Something like that," Wyatt said, and reined in facing the rancher. "Pay attention to what I say, Mike. We've got this place surrounded with enough men to blow it apart. So don't call to your crew. Play it smart, Mike, and stay alive, eh?"

"What the hell?"

"Easy, Mike," Wyatt said, dismounting. "We're coming inside with you."

He was dwarfed by the burly Riordan, but walked straight at the rancher and forced him to back into the house. Garrett dismounted and followed, but Forsythe, slipping his rifle from its boot, remained in the saddle and kept watch on the bunkhouse.

IN THE ranch house, Garrett closed the door and stood with his back to it. It was a one-room house, one end of the room serving as a kitchen and the other as sleeping quarters. In the center of the room was a plank table with dirty dishes on it and benches beside it. A frowsy, faded-looking blonde woman sat at the table, a cigarette drooping from her sullen mouth. Her gaze touched lightly on Wyatt, but lingered with a sharpening interest on Garrett. She began to primp her hair.

Riordan stood by the table, frowning. "What is all this, Wyatt?" he asked. "I'm hiding no outlaws here."

Wyatt gestured toward Garrett. "Mike, you know John Garrett?"

Riordan started. "I've heard of him."

Garrett said, "You've come to the end of your rope, Riordan. It took me a long time to catch up with you, but—"

"Now, hold on," Riordan cut in. "You've got nothing on me."

"Hell, you're not going to make me hang around here and show you what I've got on you, are you?" Garrett said sourly. "If I've got to, I will. But I don't want to waste the time. I'll just tell you what I could show you, friend. Cattle in my iron on your range. Rustlers bringing more of them here. Man, I've got enough on you to hang you! But it's not you I want—unless you're the best I can get."

Riordan said chokingly, "What's that mean?"

"I want Ed Reagan."

"I don't even know him."

Garrett said, "Dan, go bring in my men. Tell Charlie Harms to tie a hangman's knot in the end of his catch-rope."

As Wyatt turned toward the door, Garrett was watching Riordan narrowly. Shiny beads of sweat stood on the man's forehead.

Garrett said, "You said you'd heard of

me. You must have heard that I do what I set out to do. Shield Reagan if you want to, but don't think you'll change your mind at the last minute. Once the rope's around your neck, I'll string you up and never give it a second thought afterwards."

Riordan's face worked, but he didn't speak.

The woman said, "Mike, you fool, he means it!"

Riordan lifted a hand, wiped away the sweat from his forehead. He was breathing heavily, like a man who'd been running hard. "All right," he said. "I'll tell you where to find Ed."

"No," said Garrett, "you'll take me to him."

XVIII

FORSYTHE and Wyatt were the only men Garrett took along, besides Riordan. He left Charlie Harms and the other San Alejandro hands behind to disarm Riordan's men and keep them—and the woman—from riding out with a warning to the rustler crowd.

Riordan told Garrett that there weren't likely to be many Ring members with Ed Reagan. Reagan wanted to be alone with Maria, and to figure out a way to avenge his brother Matt's death. Mike Riordan had been scared into being cooperative, eager to buy his way out of the trap that had closed about him.

"Ed took Matt's death hard," Riordan said. "He was like a crazy man."

"Making threats against me, eh?" asked Garrett.

"Well, he's sure got no love for you."

Garrett chuckled. He felt good about the way things were working out. Taking Riordan had been easy; the handling of him, too. Like every man who couldn't make up his mind whether to remain strictly honest or to turn wholly crooked, Riordan was weak, and he had lost his nerve when cornered

Ed Reagan wouldn't be easy, of course. He had the guts to go the limit on the wrong side of the law. But Garrett felt that Reagan, too, was now at the end of his rope. Eager for the showdown, Garrett lifted his horse to a lope.

"Come on, Riordan," he ordered. "Get a move on!"

After perhaps five miles, they reached hilly country where the going was becoming rougher. It was moonlight, but Garrett saw no trace of a trail. Riordan never faltered, however, and shortly led them across a boulder-strewn sand flat and reined in at the base of some craggy bluffs.

Garrett said, "What's the trouble?"

Riordan had some of his nerve back. "A deal," he said. "The hide-out is just beyond, in a little canyon. But there'll be a guard posted. You can't get past him without his sounding an alarm unless he knows you."

"So?"

"All I'm asking is a break, Garrett."

Garrett swore. "You're getting one, man. What I'd like to do is string you up or put a slug through your guts. But I'm letting you live. You're not getting off scot-free, no matter how much you beg. The time's come for you to pay the piper, Riordan. You're lucky to get off with a few years in Yuma Prison, instead of going to an early grave. Now move along!"

Riordan rode on sullenly, the others following with drawn guns. They skirted the bluffs, then descended a sharp slope into a narrow canyon. As they reached the bottom of the slope a voice challenged them from the shadows of a jumble of rocks.

"Hold still a minute!"

They reined in, Riordan calling out, "Tate?"

"Yeah," the hidden man said. "That you, Mike?"

"It's me," Riordan said. "I've got to see Ed."

A shadowy figure, Tate stepped from among the rocks, a rifle in the crook of his arm. "Who's that with you?" he demanded.

"Three of my boys."

"What's the idea? You know you're not supposed to bring anybody here." Tate made a threatening gesture with his rifle. "What are you up to, Mike?"

Beaded by the rifle, Riordan's nerve was wobbly again. "Put it down, Tate!" he said. "They've got you covered. It's John Garrett and—"

Tate cursed, opened fire. He drove a shot at Riordan, fired at the other three men, and dived back for the cover of the rocks, but Dan Wyatt, riding in on him, cut him down. Garrett kicked spurs to his horse, headed into the canyon at a hard run. Mike Riordan had dropped from his horse, dead or dying. Wyatt and Forsythe came galloping after Garrett, calling to him to be careful.

Garrett rode on recklessly, peering into the darkness ahead, knowing that Reagan had heard the shots and fearing that the man would again escape him. The canyon widened gradually, and shortly Garrett sighted a couple small buildings and a corral. A man came from one of the buildings, hesitated a moment, then broke into a run. Somebody opened fire from the other building, the muzzle flashes bright against the darkness. Garrett's horse took a slug in the head and went down.

HE MANAGED to throw himself clear of the dying animal, but struck the ground with such force that he was dazed, an easy target as he lay there helpless. But Wyatt and Forsythe, off their horses now and firing from the cover of some rocks, kept the man in the building from shooting at him. He was finally able to crawl into a shallow gully, and there shook off the numbing daze. The shooting stopped.

Garrett called, "You get him?"

Wyatt answered, "No. He's just waiting for a target."

Forsythe called, "Somebody just left the other shack, John! Can you bead him?

Garrett saw a shadowy figure moving away from the buildings in the opposite direction. He swung his gun up, took aim, but did not pull the trigger. It was a woman. Maria. He called to his companions to pin down the gunman in the nearer building, and as they opened fire, he left the gully at a run and circled wide around the shacks. He didn't want Maria, but somebody with her had run off through the darkness. He was sure it had been Ed Reagan. The girl would naturally follow her man.

He was a hundred yards beyond the buildings when he saw her again, fording a shallow creek. She stumbled and nearly fell coming from the stream, but recovered and ran on like a wild creature. Garrett splashed across the creek trying to keep her in sight, but finally he lost her.

He moved more slowly, more warily now, for the canyon was narrowing again and as the walls tightened, the canyon floor changed from grass flats to rocks and brush. He was well into this rough stretch when a gun blasted in the narrow confines. Garrett dropped to the ground, his gun ready. A man appeared from a brush thicket. Garrett drove his shot home. The man dropped heavily.

A woman's voice screamed, then Maria appeared. She ran to the fallen man, knelt beside him. Garrett waited, and shortly the girl helped the man to rise. She supported him as they made their painful way in among some boulders. Garrett rose, circled, came into the rocks from the opposite direction.

Ed Reagan sat limply with his back to a boulder, and Maria knelt beside him. She was talking softly in Spanish, and crying. Reagan's gun lay beside him. He looked up at Garrett, and though the darkness obscured his face, Garrett sensed despair in the man—the last of the Reagans.

He said thickly, "I guess I knew all along you'd win, Garrett." He rumpled Maria's hair. "Move away, baby."

She surprised Garrett by obeying. The fight had gone out of her also. She stood to one side, and there were tears on her face.

Reagan said, "Well, get on with it, Garrett."

"Can you pick up your gun, Ed?"

"Why give me even a small break, Garrett?"

Garrett wondered himself. He said, "Maybe because in spite of everything you *mucho hombre*. I'd rather have had you with me than against me, Ed. Why'd you step over? You could have done all right on the right side of the law."

"I don't know," Reagan said, and reached out toward the gun.

Maria said, "John—"

Garrett didn't take his eyes off the man. Reagan looked at her, however, his hand an inch away from the butt of the gun on the

ground. Garrett realized that this was the first time Maria had ever called him by his given name. Always before he had been "*Tejano.*"

He said, "Yes, Maria?"

"I love him, John."

"Yes, I suppose you do."

"I will die if I lose him again."

"If I let him live, he'll go to prison. You'll lose him, anyway."

"In prison, he will be alive."

Garrett said, "It's up to you, Ed. Maybe you can out-shoot me, then fight off Dan Wyatt. I doubt it, but there's a slight chance."

Reagan looked at the girl, and she said, "No, Ed—no!"

He smiled wrly, then pulled his hand away from the gun. He said, "It's over, Garrett. When I come out of prison I won't start up this crazy feud again. You'll take my word for that?"

Garrett nodded, and turned away.

And Ed Reagan did not try to shoot him in the back. . . .

THERE was still much to be done before John Garrett could return to Tucson for his wife. With Mike Riordan dead, along with the guard Tate and a man named Purcell at the hideout, and the wounded Ed Reagan taken to jail at Tucson by Dan Wyatt, the backbone of the rustler ring was broken. But there were cattle on Riordan's range in Garrett's JG-Connected iron, and they were thrown into a herd for the drive back to San Alejandro Valley.

While the roundup of stolen stock was under way, two groups of rustlers showed up at Riordan's ranch with small bunches of stolen cattle. Garrett and his men seized them and they were taken to Tombstone and handed over to Acting Sheriff Al Rumans.

Garrett could walk Tombstone's streets without fear of attack now, even though, as he well knew, he was still the object of Jess Quartermane's hatred, and many of Matt Reagan's old friends were still in town. But Quartermane did not show himself while Garrett was in Tombstone, and no gunmen seemed anxious to brace the man who had smashed the Ring.

Al Rumans and Dan Wyatt were siding the cattlemen, and for the first time in Tombstone's brief but violent history, the sheriff's offices and the deputy United States marshal were acting together for law and order.

On this visit to Tombstone John Garrett had brought along Eric Forsythe and some of his rawhide-tough Texans. Garrett's own reputation won him the right to walk the streets without being molested.

When he was about to leave Tombstone Al Rumans asked him, "You know a man called El Gitano?"

"No. Who is he?"

"A smuggler. But not a Mexican, despite the nickname."

"What's his right name?"

"I wouldn't know," Rumans said. "But watch out for him. When Quartermane found out that you'd married Claire Maury, he sent a man to Tucson to find this El Gitano hombre. eJss said the smuggler could make trouble for you."

Garrett shook his head. "Never heard of him," he said. Then, heading back to Riordan's ranch with his men, he forgot the conversation.

No more rustlers showed up with stolen cattle at Riordan's, for word had spread into the hills and along the trails of the back country that Riordan was dead and Ed Reagan jailed, and long-ropers hastily dropped from sight.

Garrett recovered less than four hundred head of cattle, and had to write off most of his losses. He took that philosophically, however, reminding himself that raising cattle was more gamble than business. At any rate, he felt that his streak of bad luck had run out, and that now he could recoup his losses. The San Alejandro Ranch had been saved from ruin, and that was what counted.

He rode to Tucson to take Claire to the ranch—his wife, yes, but his wife in name only. And that was something he could not change. She could not change it herself, and he knew she wanted to, as much as he did.

They took the train at Tucson, left it at Benson where they board the Tombstone stage. They spent a night in the mining

town, then set out for the San Alejandro Ranch by buckboard. They took young Tom Dawson, still limping but no longer in need of crutches, with them.

They arrived at the ranch to find the man called El Gitano waiting.

XIX

LATE in the afternoon Garrett pulled up before his ranch house and handed the reins to Tom Dawson, saying, "Put up the team for me, son." He dropped from the buckboard, helped Claire down, and asked, "How do you like it?"

She was looking at the big house and the other solidly constructed adobe buildings, and beyond them to the vast sweep of rangeland. Her hand tightened on his arm, and she looked at him bleakly.

"It's all big and wonderful, John. Find a way to make me like it."

She meant something beyond the words. She was pleading with him to find a way for her to wipe from her mind the knowledge that he had killed her first husband, desperately wanting to accept him as her husband. He did not know what to say. He took her to the door, opened it.

"Go inside," he said. "I'll bring the baggage."

As he got Claire's trunk from the rear of the buckboard he noticed a blue roan horse standing at the corner of the house. It wore one of those spidery Mexican brands, an unfamiliar iron. He looked about the ranchyard. He saw no one. Forsythe and Harms and the rest of the headquarters crew were still on the trail with the cattle recovered from Riordan's ranch. The rest of the men were at the line camps out on the range. Perhaps the housekeeper had a visitor.

Luisa welcomed him home in an excited admixture of Spanish and English. She was more excited when he said, "Luisa, this is Mrs. Garrett. You'll help to make her feel at home, won't you?"

As he closed the door, he saw a man in his office, seated at his desk.

He asked, Luisa, "Who's that?"

She shrugged. "I do not know, Senor Garrett. He came here today and said he wanted to see Mrs. Garrett. I told him there was no Mrs. Garrett, but he laughed and said that he would wait."

Garrett looked at Claire. She was staring at the man in the office, her face blanched. She swayed. Garrett quickly put his arm about her.

"What is it, my dear?"

"That man—" She was unable to say more.

He said, "Luisa, take her to our bedroom."

Claire gripped his arm. "No, John!" Her voice was shrill, a hint of hysteria in it. "I—I've got to know! Take me to him, John."

She was trembling violently, and she leaned heavily against him as he led her to the office. She was like someone who had looked upon death, and been shaken to the core.

The stranger sat at Garrett's desk as though he had that right. He had the ranch account books open before him. He took a cigar from the humidor on the desk, and leaned back in the chair, smiling.

"Mr. and Mrs. Garrett, is it?"

Claire said thickly, "Ben!"

"Who else, my dear?"

Garrett led Claire to an armchair, then faced the man. "Ben Maury," he said. He remembered now the warning Al Rumans had given him, and to which he'd given no real attention. "Or do you prefer to be called El Gitano?"

"A name the Mexicans gave me," Maury said, still smiling. "I prefer my own, Mr. Garrett. For the present, at least." He gestured toward the account books. "I've taken the liberty of looking into your affairs, Garrett. Since, in a way, I have a stake in them."

Garrett was filled with conflicting emotions. He had not killed Claire's husband! The man he'd killed, the Dude, had not been Maury! This was Ben Maury. And this real, living Ben Maury had been properly nicknamed El Gitano—the sly one. He looked as cunning as the devil himself.

But there was no denying that he was attractive, might once have been handsome. He was small of stature, lean, and fit-look-

ing. He had wavy brown hair, a small, neat mustache, and was well-tailored and groomed. But Ben Maury's being alive meant that Claire was still his wife! Garrett had a sudden helpless feeling.

"Just what do you want, Maury?" he asked.

"That's a foolish question, Garrett. But I'll answer it. I want my wife."

"Like hell you do."

MAURY puffed on his cigar, always smiling, sure of himself. "Do you really think a man would give up such a woman?"

"I wouldn't," Garrett said. "I won't."

"You're forgetting one little thing," Maury replied. "I have first claim on her."

Claire was looking at him as though he were a ghost.

Maury said to her, "I suppose it does need some explaining, my dear. I didn't know you'd come to Arizona until after your—er—bigamous marriage. I learned of it from—"

"Jess Quartermane?" Garrett said.

"That's right," Maury replied, looking amusedly at Claire. "Quartermane at first believed that the man Garrett killed—the Dude—was your husband. Then somehow he learned that there was a man in Mexico—"

"In the smuggling game," Garrett cut in.

"—in Mexico," the man went on, "named Maury. Lawmen come by the damnedest information. Anyway, he also learned that I was called El Gitano by my Mexican friends. He got to thinking that I might be the legal husband of the woman who had just married a man named John Garrett. So he got in touch with me. It was quite a mix-up, wasn't it, my dear? You heart-broken over the death of your husband who wasn't dead, then marrying the man you thought had killed me."

Garrett asked. "How did the Dude come by your watch, Maury?"

"I lost it to him in a poker game," the man said. "It was after that run of bad luck, losing everything, that I was forced to go into business in Mexico."

"You never let her know," Garrett said. "You let her worry, and come out here to find out what had happened to you. What kind of a man are you, anyway?"

"Let's say that I'm a man of pride, Garrett. I was down on my luck, flat broke Loving my wife, I couldn't bring myself to tell her I was a failure. When I finally established myself south of the Border, I was too busy recouping my losses to think of being a good husband. Also, I feared that my wife might not approve of the sort of business I was engaged in. But that's all in the past. I've given up running *contrabando* across the Border. Now I'll get back into a respectable business, and be a devoted husband."

"Every word you speak makes you more of a four-flusher, Maury."

"You're unkind, my friend."

"What did Quartermane tell you to ask for here?"

Maury chuckled. "Are you asking me to sell my wife to you? From what your books tell me I doubt that you're in a position to pay the price I'd put on my wife's affections. Your losses through rustlers—"

"How much, Maury?"

Maury stood up, no longer looking as though he found the situation amusing. "I'm trying to make you understand that I want Claire back," he said. "But I don't want her unless that's what she wants. Give me five minutes alone with her, eh?"

Garrett frowned, not liking this. The man's turning reasonable was too sudden a switch. There was no forgetting he was El Gitano, the sly one. When a man was tagged with a nickname, it usually suited him. On the other hand, Maury would be a fool to give Claire up willingly, and he was far from being a fool. Garrett looked at Claire.

"Do you want to see him alone?"

"Yes—yes, I suppose so."

"All right," Garrett said. "I'll wait in the hall."

He left the office, closing the door behind him. He lighted a cigar, paced nervously to and fro. An overwhelming fear gripped him that Clair might still love the man—or at least feel that she had no choice but to go back to him. She took marriage vows seriously.

In no more than five minutes the door

opened and Maury came into the hallway. He had his hat in his hand, and a rueful smile on his lips.

"You seem to have won, Garrett," he said. "Congratulations."

He went out the front door, closed it after him. The beat of hoofs came as he rode away.

GARRETT went into the office, and Claire came into his arms. She was trembling, and she cried, in torment, "John I love you! Believe that!"

"Did you tell him so?"

"Yes, but—"

"But he's not done with us?"

She said chokingly, "He's changed from the man I married. He's evil!" Hysteria threatened again. "He doesn't want me, but he said—"

Garrett held her close. "He can't hurt us," he soothed, and as she grew calmer, he asked, "What did he say?"

"He said that he'll wait at Rock Creek and if I don't come to him, he'll go to Tucson and bring a charge of bigamy against me. He said he'd make me notorious all over Arizona. He said it would make a scandal because you're well known and—"

"Hell, let him!"

"No, John, I can't. I just can't."

"You're not going to him. I won't let you."

She shook her head. "I won't do that," she said. "I never want to see him again. But I can't stay here. I'm not really married to you."

Garrett said, "We love each other," but knew such an argument was useless where Claire was concerned.

Her moral code was strict, and her stay in Arizona, even her months as a faro dealer in Matt Reagan's deadfall, had not caused her to take a backward step from it. She might be persuaded that Maury's linking her name to scandal would not hurt her, but she would never live with him now that Maury was alive.

He turned away, so she could not see his anger and said, "If he gave you reason to think he doesn't want you, he must have said what he does want. What is his price for divorcing you?"

"He didn't ask for anything, John, but—"

"But you think he wants money?"

"Yes."

He faced her. "So do I," he said savagely. "He figures that the more he pretends he wants you, the higher the price he can ask. I'll be damned if I'll let this go on!"

"John!"

He looked at her steadily. "Don't worry. I'm going to buy him off, not kill him. I'm not such a fool that I don't understand that in killing him I'd lose you forever."

He left the house, headed for the corral to get a mount.

Despite what he'd said to Claire, he hated Ben Maury enough to kill him.

XX

SINCE Rock Creek was only twenty miles along the road to Tombstone from the pass that led through the hills at the north end of San Alejandro Ranch, John Garrett hoped to overtake Maury before the man got to the creek. He had a suspicion that Maury expected him, not Claire, to come there, and the man was shrewd enough to know that, once away from Claire, he wouldn't find Garrett so easily dealt with. Maury might have a friend or two at the creek, as insurance against any attempt at violence on the part of the man upon whom he would make some outrageous demand.

Garrett held his big gray gelding to a steady lope. Maury did not have much of a start, and the man's roan, having been ridden to the San Alejandro Ranch, was not so fresh as the gray.

But he saw nothing of the man as he rode across the north end of his range, nor along the road when he emerged from the cut in the hills. Maury was traveling fast, pushing the roan. Garrett became convinced that it was important to toll him the whole way to Rock Creek—and equally important for him to overtake Maury short of there.

He'd ridden perhaps five miles before he sighted his man, and it was well that he did, for it was now dusk and in a short time darkness would have given Maury cover. The roan was playing out, and Maury, looking back and seeing that he was being followed, lifted it to a useless run. The roan's stride soon faltered, and the rider realizing

that he could not escape, swung it around and reined in. Within a hundred yards of Maury, Garrett pulled the gray down to a walk. He drew his revolver. Maury lifted his hands.

"I'm not armed, Garrett."

Garrett rode in close. "Hell, you think I care?"

Maury showed no uneasiness. "Don't think I came out here without letting my friends know," he said. "If I don't get back to Tombstone, they'll know I've been murdered—and that you murdered me. You won't be able to square the murder of your woman's lawful husband, Garrett."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"A man has to live either by his wits or his gun in this country," Maury said. "And I'm not good with a gun. Nor do I want to be. It's more profitable for me to rely on my brains."

"How profitable do you expect this to be for you?"

"I haven't asked you for money, have I?"

Garrett said, "You don't want Claire."

Maury made no immediate reply, and it seemed to Garrett that the man was suddenly not too confident. Garrett was sure now that it was at Rock Creek that Maury had wanted to talk to him.

"You've got the whip, so crack it," he said flatly. "You've worked it all out in your mind. Claire isn't in a position to divorce you, but she's unwittingly given you grounds to obtain one easily. Quit stalling, for God's sake. Name your price and give her her freedom."

The look of indecision was still in Maury's eyes, but after a moment he seemed to have made up his mind. "All right, Garrett," he said. "Ten thousand dollars."

"You'll get it when you've got the divorce."

"I want it now."

"Don't take me for a fool, man! If I handed you the money now, in six months you'd want another ten thousand!"

Maury's half amused, half mocking smile showed again. His confidence was restored. "Garrett, you're in no position to make the terms," he said. "I know Claire. I lived with her, and I know her nature. She won't be your woman so long as she's not your legal wife. You'll pay now, and you damn well know it. I'll wait at Rock Creek and—"

Garrett hit him.

It was a calculated blow, not one struck in rage, but there was no power behind it. Maury's head rocked back and he reeled in his saddle. Garret hit him again, knocking him from his horse.

Dismounting, Garrett was just in time to see Maury fumbling a short-barreled revolver from his coat pocket. He kicked out, catching the man under the chin as he struggled to rise. Maury fell over onto his side, crying out, but not loosening his hold on the gun. Garrett stamped his boot heel on Maury's wrist, forcing a scream from his throat and the revolver from his hand. Kicking the gun out of reach, Garrett looked down at the injured man without any feeling at all.

"That's just a sample of what I can give you," he said flatly. "Will you talk now, or after I've really roughed you up?"

HE SAW Maury's frightened look, and knew that he'd guessed right. A man who lived by his wits couldn't take violence, couldn't stand pain.

Maury gasped, "I—I don't know what you mean!"

"Who's waiting for you at Rock Creek? It wouldn't be Jess Quartermane, would it?"

"No. I—"

Garrett made as if to kick him, and Maury screamed, "Garrett—don't!"

Eying him with contempt, Garrett said, "Is it Quartermane?"

"Yes."

"Now it's beginning to make sense."

"Let up on me, Garrett. I'll play it your way. I don't want Claire."

Garrett found that hard to believe, but believed Maury was telling the truth. "There's another woman, is there?" he asked.

Maury sat up, gently touching his jaw. "A Mexican girl," he said thickly. "I got in with her when I went down to Sonora. I'd been away from my wife a long time and—well, I'm fond of the girl, Garrett." He got some of his nerve back, and stood up, swaying. "I was a fool to try anything like this, but Quartermane declared it could be

pulled off. I won't give you any more trouble."

"So it wasn't money you were after?"

"No."

"You were to get me out to Rock Creek and Quartermane would ambush me?"

"It was his idea, I tell you!"

"I believe it," Garrett said. "Quartermane hates my guts enough to murder me." He stared at Maury. "I get it. He roped you into it by pointing out that once I was dead, the San Alejandro Ranch would be Claire's, if she was believed to be my widow. He probably told you that between you, you could intimidate her into playing along—as the only way she could save her good name. But you should have known how much Claire would play a crooked game like that—any crooked game. Anyhow, you thought the two of you would step in before long and the ranch wouldn't be hers, but yours. That was what Quartermane said. But how long do you think he would have let you share it—and have Claire? You poor fool! It's because of her that Quartermane hates me. But he didn't mention that, did he?"

Maury shook his head. "It looks as though I'm not as smart as I thought."

"You're out of your class, friend," Garrett told him. "Whereabouts at Rock Creek is Quartermane waiting?"

"He's camping among some trees."

"All right. Go meet him. I'll be right behind you—with my gun. So don't try to warn him."

A sickly look came to Maury's face. "Why not let well enough alone, Garrett?"

"Like you said, you're not too bright," Garrett told him. "This thing between Quartermane and me has got to be settled!"

It was nearly midnight when they came within sight of Rock Creek. Garrett reined in at the side of the road, dismounted. He took his rifle from the saddle-boot, levered a cartridge into the firing chamber. He left his horse ground-hitched.

"Ride in slow and easy," he said to Maury. "Make it seem as though your visit turned out all right. Savvy?"

Maury nodded jerkily.

"Don't try to run or I'll kill you."

"How do I know you won't kill me afterwards?"

"You don't," Garrett said. "But I promised Clair that I wouldn't. Move along—slow and easy."

Maury rode on, holding his spent roan to a slow walk. Garrett followed him at a distance of perhaps fifty yards, taking cover in a small brush thicket along the creek bank when Maury drew close to the trees. There was the red glow of the embers of a campfire in a clump of scrub cottonwoods. A man who sat by the nearly dead fire rose as Maury approached. Garrett moved through the brush, bent low.

Quartermane called, "That you, Maury?"

"Yeah."

"How did it go?"

"He'll come. I played it smart. Both Garrett and my wife think I can be bought." Maury's voice was shaky. "He'll come with an offer, sure."

Quartermane's heavy voice suddenly sharpened. "What ails you? Come on in!"

MAURY had halted, afraid to venture farther. Garrett peered at Quartermane, his heart beating hard and fast with sudden excitement. Quartermane drew his gun, started toward Maury, saying, "What are you scared of? You doublecross me?"

Garrett said, "Never mind him, Jess."

His voice spun Quartermane in his direction, and the man said, "Garrett!" and cursed him, swinging his gun up.

Quartermane fired two quick shots, then sprinted to place Maury between himself and Garrett. Maury cried out in terror, wheeled his roan in panicky flight—and rode directly into Quartermane's next shot. Maury screamed, the roan spooked. The man was bucked from the saddle, falling loosely to the ground. Garrett was ready and when Quartermane's next shot came he drove his own shot home.

Quartermane staggered, tried to fire again. He dropped to his knees, kept himself from falling flat by bracing himself with his left arm. He kept trying to bring his gun to bear, but it was now too heavy for him and finally fell from his hand. On his knees, Quartermane wasted the last of his strength cursing Garrett, then he flattened and did not move again.

Garrett started toward Ben Maury, thinking, She'll never believe I didn't kill him. He went toward the man hoping Maury was not dead, and knowing it was hopeless.

A voice stopped him. "Careful, Garrett. This is Al Rumans."

The acting-sheriff was putting his horse across the creek. Garrett waited until Rumans reined in before him.

"How much did you see and hear, Al?"

"All of it. A fair fight."

"You saw that it was Quartermane's slug that killed this man?"

"Sure. Why?"

"You'll testify to that, if need be?"

"Why not?" said Rumans. "I'd been keeping an eye on Jess and saw him leave Tombstone with this hombre and a packhorse. I figured this fellow was that El Gitano Jess sent for, and that they were planning a surprise for you. So I trailed 'em. I'd been watching from back a piece. Sorry I wasn't close enough to give you a hand. What was Jess up to?"

Thinking that Rumans had earned the right to know, Garrett told him what Quartermane had planned and who El Gitano was.

Rumans said, "So he was Claire's husband, not that Dude hombre you killed when you first came to Arizona. And that's why you may need me as a witness."

Garrett nodded. "I don't want her to think I killed him."

"I'll have to go back to Tombstone for a wagon," Rumans said. "Then I'll ride out to your ranch, just in case the lady needs convincing."

Garrett said, "I'd appreciate that, Al. . . ."

He came within sight of his ranch headquarters in the first faint light of the new day. He reined in on a rise and watched dawn come again to the San Alejandro Ranch, and there came to him a feeling of peace and contentment. It was over, his need to fight for what was his here in Arizona. The cost had been great—from the night his son had died. There had been times when he'd known despair, could see nothing ahead but defeat and ruin.

But the past was gone, and the future lay before him. He had lost the son he loved, and some of his Texas men. However, he still had Eric Forsythe, Charlie Harms, and some others of his Texas crew. Then there was the boy, Tom Dawson. He would make something of the boy. He'd made worthwhile friends—Al Rumans, Dan Wyatt, Juan Monteros. Most of all, he'd learned that taking life wasn't the answer. He had let Ed Reagan live, for Maria.

His trail across Arizona Territory was a broad one, and this wide southeast corner of the land was his to have and to hold as long as he lived. But above and beyond all else, the woman he loved awaited him. He rode on toward his home.

SHE was waiting where he had left her, in his office. She rose, her eyes seeking to read in his face the answer to the questions she was afraid to put into words.

He said, "It's over, Claire."

The tenseness went out of her. She sighed with a vast quivering relief.

He removed his hat, threw it onto a chair. He unbuckled his gun-rig, wrapped the cartridge belt about the holster and laid it on the desk.

"He's dead, Claire," he said soberly. "But I didn't kill him. Can you believe that?"

"Yes. I know you wouldn't lie to me." She came toward him. "May I be forgiven, but I wouldn't have been able to blame you if you had killed him."

"Claire—"

She said, "Don't talk, John. I've been waiting—we've been waiting so long."

She came into his arms, and in that moment held nothing of herself from him.

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AMBUSH OF HATE by STEUART EMERY

PLUS TWO OTHER COMPLETE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS!

TWO who wore

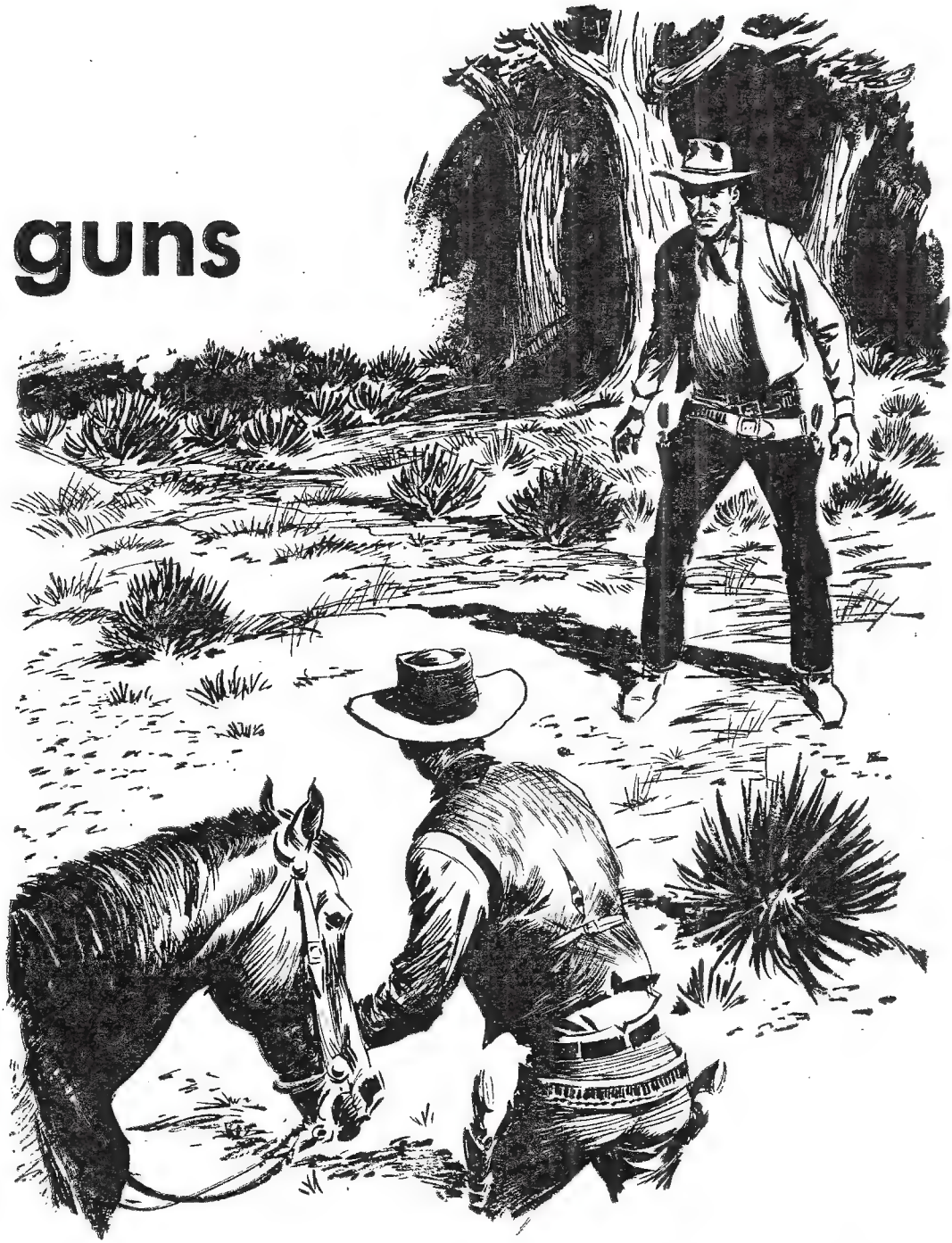
A Novel by LAURAN PAINE

I

IT MAY have been pure coincidence that Owl Russel and Rezin Hartman rode into Buckrum on the same day, and at the same hour. In the bloody events that followed, even Sheriff Dexter Williams forgot it, like everyone else, but still it was odd. Or perhaps it was the hand of Fate.

Rezin was standing in the livery barn runway counting out 'dobe dollars and handing them to the barn boss, when Owl Russel rode in. Dismounting, he waited silently, his black eyes taking in the whole scene at once, his two guns hanging low and bulky on his lean hips.

guns



Each came to kill but for reasons as different as the women they came to love. Only their tied-down guns were alike . . .

His glance flickered over the sheriff and a deputy standing slouched at the doorway, hip-shot and relaxed in the shade.

Rezin got his change, turned abruptly and walked back out toward the murderously gouging fingers of sunlight that leached the very sweat of a man's body before it got fairly well out of his pores. He went past the sheriff and deputy without a glance.

Both studied him silently and exchanged glances. Owl Russel, too, watched Rezin's back and did not miss the two guns. He shrugged, handed the liveryman his split reins and raised black eyebrows that matched the agate and ebony of his eyes.

The barn boss understood, and said, "By the day, a dollar. That's if you want him stalled and grained. In the corral, without grain—"

"Stalled and grained." Owl held out four silver cartwheels, and the liveryman took them deftly in his free hand.

Owl looked down the cool interior of the big barn and breathed deeply of the smell. An army of blue-tailed flies were following each other around and around, lazily, in the middle of the big alleyway.

"What stall'll you have him in?"

Sheriff Williams was listening idly. He threw his deputy a short glance and looked inside at Owl as the liveryman made some rapid calculations and said:

"Fourth down on the north side." He pointed.

Russell nodded, glanced at the stall to fix its location in his mind. Then he looked back and asked, "Who's that hombre that just left? Feller who rode in here ahead of me?"

The barn boss shook his head. "Never saw him before. Lots of travelers this time of year. Roundups are going full blast. Riders come and go. Some—"

"Yeah—yeah."

RUSSELL turned abruptly and stalked away. He went past Dexter Williams and the deputy with just one cold, contemptuous glance, then the sidewalk traffic swallowed him up. Sheriff Williams looked after him thoughtfully.

"Berl," he drawled, "there's a real nice hombre. Pleasant and smiling."

Deputy Berl Clausen understood the heavy sarcasm. "Yeah. They're all the same."

The sheriff's head came around. "Who?"

"Gunmen, Dex. They're both gunslingers."

Sheriff Williams nodded. "Funny, too. Come in within ten seconds of one another." He slapped resignedly at a fly that lit on his cheek. "Always impatient, mostly all wear two guns, and act like hardcases. Like you say—all the same, Berl."

Clausen nodded and spat in the dust. "It's a bad sign, Dex."

"What?"

"Two of them coming to town the same day—same damned hour, in fact. Bad sign."

Williams only nodded, and glanced in the direction of the hotel toward which the two gunmen had headed.

Conseil Purdy ran the hotel—the Parker House—and the dancehall, card room and saloon that occupied the lower floor. Purdy, better known as "Con" was a swarthy man of French descent, with a bloodless line for a mouth, and the tip of his right ear had been nicked off in a long-forgotten knife fight. He watched the lithe, fair-complexioned Rezin Hartman come through the louvred doors, and glued his eyes on the two guns. His heart beat a little faster.

Leaning against the north wall in the shadows, he watched as Rezin ordered a beer, then walked casually to the upper end of the bar and slouched on the scarred wood. Standing there, he let his flinty eyes rake over everything and everyone in the long room.

Con had almost made up his mind when the doors quivered inward again, and another two-gun man walked in. The hotelman frowned, indecision in his muddy eyes. One of these two had to be the man to whom he had sent word down the backtrail to come and see him. But which one? Both were obviously gunmen. Both had arrived at the same time. Con swore to himself.

Owl Russel ordered a whiskey mash and toyed with it as his black eyes boldly raked over the saloon. He saw Conseil Purdy watching him, studied the cropped ear for a long second, then took his drink and walked

over to the shadowy wall and leaned against it beside Con.

"You own this place?"

Con turned a little, half-facing Owl, and nodded. "Yeah."

"You like birds?"

Con nodded curtly. This was his man. "Owls," he said shortly. "Come in the office."

Owl didn't move. He drank some of his whiskey mash. "This is good enough," he said then.

Con was annoyed. He hesitated, then shrugged. "Five hundred for a dead Indian."

"Where's he at?"

"South of Buckrum about two miles. Got an old shack down in the willows by the river. Goats are staked around the place. His name's—"

"I don't give a damn about his name. Give me the money."

"Not here. In the office."

"Right here. You go get it."

Owl didn't look at Con Purdy until the hotelman was walking toward his office. Then Owl turned his hawkish, swarthy, taut-skinned profile and raked him with his black eyes, looked away in contempt and downed the rest of his drink. He went over to the bar and got another. As he went back to the wall with it in his hand, he saw Rezin Hartman at the upper end of the room and idly watched him.

Rezin had another beer. It wasn't cold, but it was wet and cool and strong. It loosened the dust and scorch in his throat. He drank his second one, sighed and left the coolness of the Parker House bar.

The sun gouged into his dilated irises on the duckboards outside. A million flies scrambled away from the hitch-rail as he ducked past the drooping animals and walked across the wide thoroughfare to a clapboard building where a sign read:

Buckrum Land & Abstract Company

He peered through a badly specked window. When he saw only one person inside, he knuckled open the door and went in.

AN OLD man, half-asleep at the desk, his collar and string tie awry and beads of sweat on his high forehead and around perpetually squinted eyes, looked up. He started slightly and half arose.

Rezin Hartman made a brusque motion with one sun-blackened hand. "Never mind all that. Where's Antrim?"

"Rezin—listen to me. You can't go—"

The gunman said grimly, "I didn't come here to talk, Burt. Just one thing. Where's Bull Antrim?"

The old man's mouth opened and closed twice. He didn't say anything. A warped old wall clock ticked monotonously. Rezin Hartman remained standing, hands resting on his hips near the tied-down guns—as they did habitually—the bitter, icy blue of his eyes patiently looking at the man before him. His uncle, Burt Hunt.

He said, "If you don't want to tell me, Uncle Burt, I'll find out anyway. I just thought you'd want to."

Hunt let a torrent of words burst out of him then. "It ain't that I wouldn't tell you, Rezin! Good God, boy, there's been enough killing. Nothing will bring them back. More killing won't help. It was long ago, Rezin. Listen! I've lived longer than you. I know—"

Rezin turned away abruptly, but hesitated in the doorway. He said coldly, "Talk like that won't change a thing, Burt."

"Rezin, listen." In old Burt Hunt's voice was a desperate note. "There's times when forgetting is the best way!"

"Uncle Burt—you're a damned coward!"

The words bounced back off the wall and struck Burt Hunt again and again, long after the door had closed and the two-gun man was gone. He put his head down into his hands on the desk.

Rezin Hartman was going into the livery barn just as Owl Russel, on his sleek black horse rode out, turning south. They exchanged frigid glances, then turned their heads from each other.

Rezin got his horse from the hostler, who reeked of sour wine, asked about Bull Antrim, and got the answer he wanted. Saddling up he swung aboard, kneed his mount out into the sunlight and struck west by south from Buckrum with that lethal sun burning down on him as he rode.

It was slightly cooler when he swung

through the cottonwood lane that led to the pole buildings and sod barns of the old Salazar holdings. They now were owned by Cliff Lewis, gnarled, hard and ruthless, but a power in the land. Rezin left his grulla tied in the shade of a cottonwood at the end of the lane and, spurs ringing mournfully, walked into the clearing of the big yard. He called out:

"Antrim!"

The ranch was as silent as a tomb, under the awful sun-blasting. Sweat ran annoyingly down Rezin's ribs from his armpits.

"Antrim!"

The second call was louder. A man appeared on the porch of the ranch house, squinting and rubbing his eyes. He had been napping. He saw the lone man in the yard, legs spread.

"Who you want?" he demanded.

"Bull Antrim."

"Oh? Well, holler again. He's down at the bunkhouse." The man shuffled his feet and turned back into the house. Rezin had recognized Cliff Lewis, even if the old rancher had not recognized him.

He grinned coldly through his squint and yelled again, "Antrim!"

"Yeah?" It was a sullen sound that answered him, a sound such as a truculent bear would make when bothered. "Who are you? What you want?"

Rezin's squint was fixed. "You, Bull! You damned murderer!"

Bull Antrim's eyes flickered open wide even as he went for his gun. The warm stock struck his sweaty palm and jumped clear of the holster.

REZIN drew and fired in one smooth flow of motion, and Antrim went over sideward on the porch of the sod bunkhouse, hard hit, but still conscious. Rezin watched narrowly as Bull's gun came up. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cliff Lewis jump wildly on his stockinged feet and whirl back from the door, wide awake now.

Antrim's shot went wild, and with cool detachment Rezin tripped the trigger of his right-hand gun. Antrim's paunch quivered and his feet drummed crazily on the small bunkhouse porch. His fingers had released his gun, and were making odd little climbing gestures, as though his final thought had been to get up and run away.

But Rezin was running now, the bellow of Cliff Lewis tumbling down the hot land after him, and the scorched air stinging his lungs like fire. He was wet all over when he reached the cottonwoods, untied, swung up, and swirled away in a gust of powdery dust.

Bull Antrim was dead, but the cowboys in the C L bunkhouse would not be eager to step over him and expose themselves, to chase after his killer. The thundering hoofbeats of Rezin's mount diminished gradually in the direction of Buckrum.

As he raced on, he saw a horseman far ahead, and wondered if it could be the dark gunman who looked to be part Indian whom he'd seen in the livery barn and the saloon. When the rider veered off due north, Rezin breathed easier, but he was still wondering about the breed.

II

THE rider Rezin Hartman had seen was not Owl Russel. But there was no way he could know that the man ahead was a C L cowhand. Nor that right then Owl was riding toward some goats. Six of them.

He rode among them, watching warily for the thongs that held them to their stakes. Owl cursed the goats, the Indian who had staked them around his hovel, and the sun which was the worst of all.

It was cool in among the willows, though, even if they hadn't trimmed back enough to allow head clearance for a horseman. Owl saw the muddy, sluggish slattern of a river known as the Little Brazos, and smelled the decayed river vegetation along the bank before he came to the mean hovel that leaned wearily upon a faggot goat corral. He reined up, drew one gun, turned his black horse sideward, thumbed back the hammer, and called out:

"Hey, Indian!"

There was a rustle in the front of the shack facing the river as a mahogany-colored hand shoved aside the burlap sacking that served as a summer door. A tall, lean Indian with graying hair came out. As soon as he was outside he saw what was coming. His

expression had only started to change when Owl's gun belched flame and slammed back into the thumb-pad of his fist. There was an amazed, unbelieving look in the Indian's black eyes for one instant, then drops of scarlet were showing over one of the eyes as blood escaped from his pulverized skull.

Owl's horse jumped violently. The saddle went a little off-center. He cursed viciously, swung down without another look at the dead Indian, shoved the saddle on-center and jerked the cinch tight with his left hand. Hearing a small sound, he whirled toward the shack, but as a little boy of about four came out and surveyed his dead father solemnly, Owl holstered his gun and spat cotton.

The boy looked at Owl, took three tentative steps toward him. Then, eyes glistening at sight of the handsome black horse, he ran forward, arms held up.

When the child was close Owl blinked at him, squatted, picked up some pebbles and tossed them at him. The little boy stopped dead-still, an awful look of hurt and shock in his black eyes. He looked wistfully again at the black horse, and watched as Owl swung up, took one look at the dead man behind him, and reined away.

Owl heard someone coming through the willows, and urged his mount into a reckless lope. He had one fleeting glimpse of a woman hurrying through the reeds with a water bucket, her round dark face contorted with anxiety. Then he was using his spurs on the black. . . .

Word of the two killings traveled fast. Buckrum knew all about Bull Antrim long before the news arrived about the Digger Indian down by the river. Porky John, he had been called. Too bad.

But—Bull Antrim! Hell, *he* was foreman of Cliff Lewis' C L! Boss of the biggest, most powerful outfit in the Brazito country.

Deputy Berl Clausen chewed on his cud of Day's Work and let tobacco juice keep his throat from feeling like an old rasp as he put into words the general opinion of Buckrum. He looked soberly at the sheriff.

"Golamighty, Dexter. Two in one day! That's bad."

Williams did not deny it. He just said nothing at all.

The Parker House saloon was a beehive of speculation. Cowmen, townsmen, and transients alike were caught up in the morbid excitement over Bull Antrim's killing, and over the less spectacular, but just as fatal accident to Porky John, the Digger Indian.

Conseil Purdy was startled when he saw Owl Russel drinking at the far end of the bar. The gunman had his money, the job was done, it was night, and the man should be riding. Con chewed the inside of his cheek nervously, and noticed that Owl was again drinking whisky mash.

HE AVOIDED the swarthy gunman, which wasn't hard to do. For the saloon was jammed with sweaty, boisterous men whose spurs were making a musical obbligato for their bass voices. He looked at his spring-face watch and nodded to a thin man with sad eyes, sitting by the piano. The man began to play, and the noise of voices died down to a muted rumble.

It stopped completely as a girl came out of the card room into the saloon. Owl Russel felt the old nagging inside him that always made him feel hot and dry and buoyant. She was a big girl, with sturdy legs and a flat stomach and a large, heavy bust that was alarmingly bountiful.

Owl liked every inch of what he saw—and what he couldn't see but could imagine. He knew it would all be clear, hard flesh with a dark overtone, or so he thought in the furry blur of his whisky-mash imagination. She had a full mouth and big black eyes with ebony lashes that swept upward at the corners—Indian blood—and that, too, quickened the dark flesh of Owl Russel.

The pulse in his throat was making it hard for him to breathe. He drank up and ordered another. The bartender looked at him oddly, but he didn't notice. He was listening to the singing of the girl—and marveling at the abundant look of her.

She finished her song, waved scornfully when men yelled and stamped for more, and went back toward the card-room doorway. There she hesitated, looking back, as someone tossed silver at her. She turned, arched her eyebrows, and clutched at it.

Silver fairly rained down then. She smiled and came back. Owl's silver went, too. He laughed loudly. It was a neat act she had put on, and he appreciated it. Reaching for his fifth whisky mash he circled dark fingers and crushed them against the cool glass. He wanted to hurt something—to squeeze and tear and feel it pant and gasp under him. He drank deeply, and in the obsidian coals that were his jet-black eyes sparks of lust for the singer were a glistening challenge.

Con Purdy saw Owl's eyes and, as if accepting that as a signal, left the man with guns to hire completely alone. It made him uneasy, having that killer around. Con was rash and evil, but he was also prudent and clever. He wanted the two-gun man to get out of the country.

Then another—the last, he told himself—of his secrets would be forever locked away from the world. The only witness when he had killed a man named Hartman had been the Digger Indian—and only recently, after years had passed, had he found that out, and that the Digger had been biding his time, waiting for something to happen that was now about to occur and unlock the red man's tongue. Now the Indian was silenced.

Purdy was watching the two-gun man furtively when he saw the girl's black eyes meet Owl Russel's stare. Owl was leaning with his back to the bar, watching her. Con wondered what were her thoughts of the gunman.

The hotelman could not know it, but at that moment the singer had read Owl Russel aright. Not many men, she knew, would dare stand with their elbows on the bar like that. There were too many others who would challenge the right to so much space on a busy night.

She felt a shock as she met his glance. He was lean-hipped and big of chest and shoulder, with the compact power of physical strength in every line of him. Being big herself, she liked men big. Owl Russel was big.

He smiled, no more than a lift of the corners of his mouth. The black eyes held their stare steadily. There was no hint of a smile in them to match that on his lips. She gave him stare for stare, then three drunks stepped into the duel of the eyes and broke the spell.

Owl finished another drink, shoved away the bar and walked through the crowd until he was behind the three drunks. He took two by their necks and flung them away. The third hesitated, read death in the black eyes, and slunk away. One, a wispy man, swore as he caught his balance and jerked upright.

Owl Russel was watching him unblinkingly, almost eagerly. He loved himself in a moment of challenge, when he was the focus of attention. And especially when a woman like this singer with the big breasts and flat belly was the stake. It was like dynamite inside him, where the liquor kept the flames white-hot.

THE wispy man stared, tense, for a long moment. But Owl knew the man wouldn't fight. With each passing second the man's guts were seeping out through his boot soles. Owl spat into the sawdust at his feet and swore deliberately, calling the man everything he could think of. He wanted to fight, to kill. He reviled the man's mother, his father, his legitimacy, and his looks. The wispy man was white-faced. He sagged, shook his head, sobbed, and half ran out of the saloon. That night he left Buckrum.

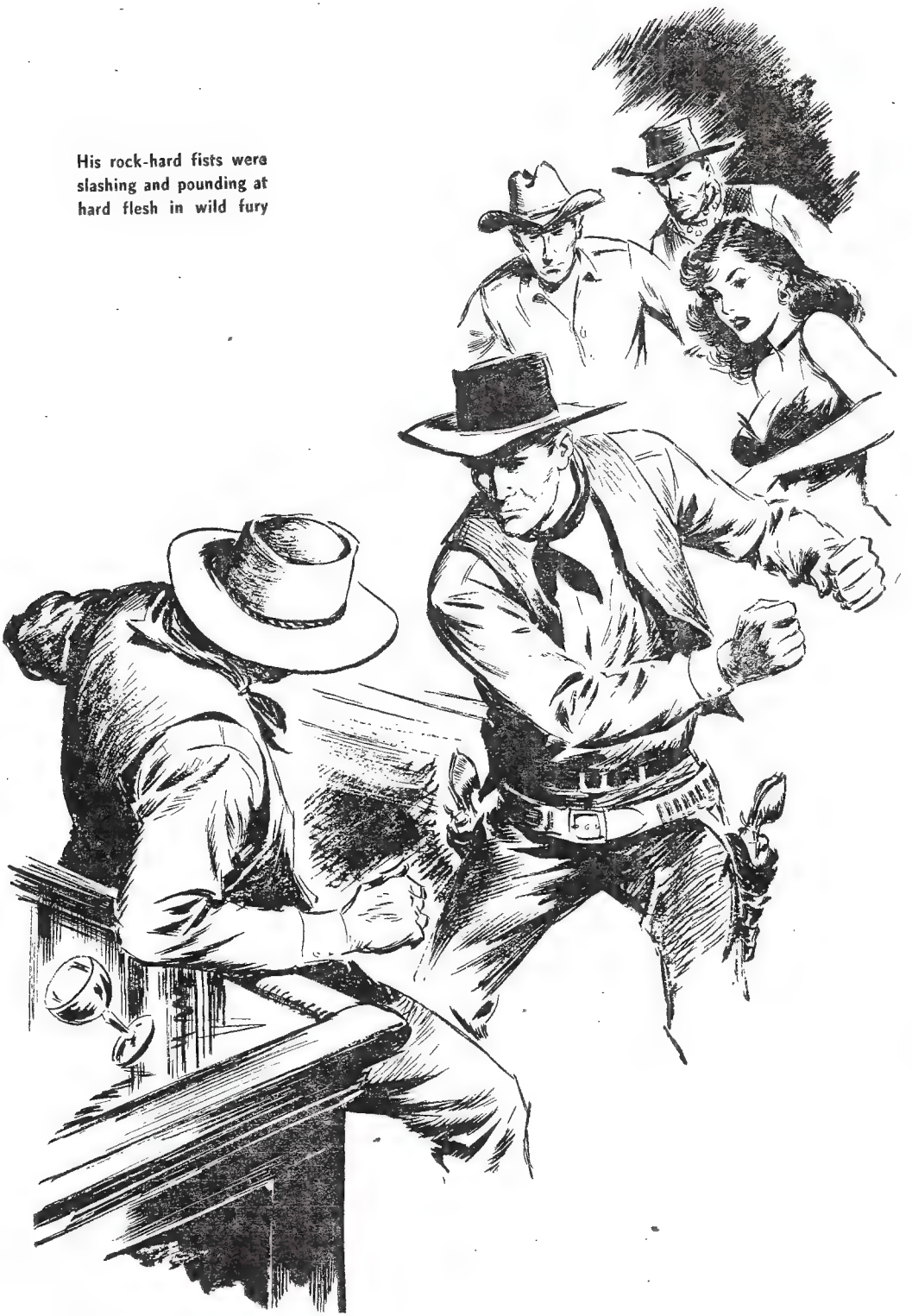
Owl turned to the girl then, and the noise started up again. Men avoided him, though. And he could sense the way they watched him, even though they did it casually. He didn't like that, because it made him lonesome, but he'd seen it before.

He smiled into the singer's black eyes and kept his glance from dropping to the tantalizing lushness of her. He wanted her, but he didn't want her to know it—yet.

"I like your singing," he said. "Come on—I'll buy you a drink."

They went to a small corner table near a defunct stove. An harassed bartender brought them liquor. The big girl made him bring her a glass of water to cut it with. She was as cool as if she were not feeling a strange thrill at being with this two-gun man. He was an animal. Big and wild and savage. Something else, too. She could sense it, without being able to define it.

"You're new here?" she asked him.



His rock-hard fists were slashing and pounding at hard flesh in wild fury

"I am," he murmured. "Come in today. I was just passing through, but now I'm going to stay and listen to you sing. I like your singing, I told you."

Even as he spoke, the ghost of a smile on his lips was gone, and harshness had replaced it. It frightened her a little, but thrilled her, too.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Eliza Bent. What's yours?"

"Owl Russel . . Liza. I like that, too." He leaned forward to get up. "Come on, Liza. Walk out with me. I need some fresh air."

Envious eyes followed them. Hungry glares watched the roll of her walk.

Though neither Eliza Bent nor the swarthy gunman had noticed, or were aware of it, Rezin Hartman was among the watchers. He and his uncle, Burt Hunt. But what they saw brought different reactions. Burt Hunt was indifferent, weary and sick-looking, as if only half seeing, and not caring at all. Rezin was sardonically smiling, until he looked back at his uncle and saw that Burt Hunt was pushing against his eyeballs with blunt fingers.

"This place is full of C L cowboys, Rezin," old Hunt muttered. "No one has recognized you, though. So now that you've got a chance, get to hell back where you came from. It'll be plain enough that a Hartman's been in the Brazito country and wiped the slate clean for the killing of Birch and Tamsen Hartman. No one will know it was you except me, though. And that's a secret that'll die with me, boy."

Rezin felt both pity and contempt for the old man as he opened his gullet to let the warm beer slide down like tangy oil. "How about the ranch, Burt? How about the damned land my folks built into a ranch before Antrim's crowd killed them? What about that? Am I supposed to let that go, too?"

Burt Hunt swore under his breath and groaned. "Rezin, for God's sake, let well enough alone! I don't want to see my sister's boy killed!" He leaned over the table with a pleading stare. "Rezin, look here. You've got enough money for a ranch now. I had it all put in trust for you years ago. Don't throw it away. Go back to Wyoming and forget the brazitos. Be a man, Rezin, not a killer. Please!"

Rezin Hartman had a lucid moment when the brittle crystal of his killing lust let him see, fleetingly, his uncle's side. Uncle Burt really and truly believed that no good could come of revenge. A man's blood becomes sluggish when he is sixty, and beginning to look beyond this life and prepare for the next one.

WELL—Rezin Hartman wasn't sixty. His blood wasn't sluggish, and he didn't intend to leave the Brazitos until the killers of his parents were smashed and bloody and dying! The fire came back in a rush. It made the moisture in his eyes hot.

He had slammed down his mug and turned on his uncle savagely, when someone shrieked outside. The swing doors quivered inwardly crazily and Eliza Bent came running and sobbing into the room, her dress torn at the waist and bosom, the light catching the sequins dropping from it at every step. There was stark terror, hysteria, in her black eyes, and a thin ribbon of blood had whipped back onto her cheeks from her mouth where she'd been struck with the back of an angry hand.

Rezin Hartman saw all this even as the blindness of his wrath consumed him. He also saw Owl Russel barge through the doors, shouting insanely and obscenely, staggering a little, flinging awful epithets after the girl.

Then something exploded inside of Rezin. He never was able to recall leaving his uncle at the table and crossing the room. He knew only that that swarthy face was swimming, dancing before him, then that his rock-hard fists were slashing and pounding into hard flesh in a fury of wildness. An overtone of shouting was clouding his world, but of that he was just dimly aware.

Owl was jerked into the center of the room and was knocked to his knees, kicked up again, and slammed through the hastily scuttling men until he crashed against the bar. Owl apparently fought for clarity, but it was futile with those hammering fists thundering into his stomach, his ribs, his face,

until they slid off covered with little pieces of bloody flesh, and back down to his stomach again.

Blinded and deathly sick, Owl clawed with rubber fingers for his guns—and the top was ripped off the world! A vicious light seared through and past his eyeballs, and he fell forward to lie twitching and bloody in the slippery sawdust.

III

CONSEIL PURDY was sweating all over when his two bartenders converged on the sun-darkened two-gun man with the crazy smile who stood panting for air, waiting for their approach.

Rezin's lips curled away, flat, from his teeth, but he made no move toward his guns. He shook himself and turned around. Burt Hunt was gone. Rezin's lungs felt as if hot tar had been poured into them, but his blood had cooled a little. Waiting for Purdy's bartenders he went over to the table, scooped up his hat, jammed it onto his head and walked to the door. There he turned back and spoke to Con.

"Tell that girl to stay away from breeds. May not be any *men* around next time to help her out."

Then he was out into the balmy night with its high overcast of cobalt blue where the teepee lights of the Indians' Great Sand Hills showed through myriad little moth holes in the tapestry of the heavens. . . .

Rezin had no idea what time it was when he swung off a brush-choked old wagon road, long abandoned, rode through a gaping hole where once a gate had been, and dismounted before a log house about a hundred feet from a huge old barn. For all of the years of neglect, the chinking in the walls of home and barn was still as tight as it was the day wise and patient hands had put it there.

He stood looking over the eerie scene. In the moonlight, weak and watery, there was a sense of infinite sadness and brooding about the old deserted ranch. Rezin felt the ghostliness.

He sighed, turned back and unsaddled his horse, slipped on the hobbles and eased off the bit. The horse shook himself and moved off to explore this place new to him, with languid interest.

Rezin lugged his gear around the side of the house where he knew there was an old stoned-in well box, and set up camp. Then he walked carefully around the house again until he came to a sign that said:

Keep Out! No Trespassing! CL Ranch property.
Cliff Lewis.

Rezin's mouth was tight. He reached up with one hand, grasped the edge of the painted board and yanked. The sign broke and fell with a tiny sharp sound. He kicked it away and went inside.

Pack rats, coyotes and bats had held many a banquet in the broad rooms. He overlooked that, and in his mind's eye peopled the place with a small boy of eight, a tall, bearded man with merry blue eyes and a blunt jaw—like his own—and a full bodied woman with bronze-gold hair and wearing a sweeping dress. He turned abruptly and went back outside, around to his blankets, and rolled up. The moon was going down in a wash of its own irradiance.

Rezin's nerves were raw, and he slept late. The sun was high and hot when he finally rolled out, saw his horse drowsing in the willows along a stingy creek, stretched grandly, and scooped water out of the well. It was ice cold and stung him wide awake. He was finishing up by running wet fingers, in lieu of a comb through his own bronze-gold hair when someone spoke. He froze, arms overhead and three feet from his guns.

"Didn't you see the sign"

He turned. It was a woman's voice. He stared owlishly. She was a head shorter than he was, but still tall and willowy with long, clean-limbed litheness and young breasts that jutted out, ripe and challengingly. Her eyes were blue and her small straight nose was flecked with tiny freckles. He let his breath out gradually and lowered his arms.

"Yes'm. I saw the sign."

"It means what it says. No trespassing."

He thought it over before answering. "You own the place?"

"My father does. Cliff Lewis. I'm Faith Lewis. We own all the land west and south of Buckrun. You a drifter?"

He knew the big blue eyes were appraising him. He let her have a good look, then smiled coldly.

"Not exactly a drifter, Miss Lewis. A rider, a traveler, and other things." He saw her eyes flick over to where his two guns hung, but ignored it. "But not necessarily a drifter."

"Well," she said, "you're still trespassing." She turned a little, had started to point when she saw the broken sign lying face-down in the weeds. She said over her shoulder, "Did you do that? Tear that sign off the house?"

"Yes'm."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "You wouldn't understand."

THERE was anger in her eyes now as she tossed the reins over her horse's neck and swung up. He watched the movement and admired the body. It was an exquisite thing, full of bloom and health. She glared down at him.

"Trespassing's bad enough, but destroying property is worse." She turned her horse. "I'll send some of the boys over, when I get back. You'd better be gone, stranger. The C L doesn't like trespassers, especially those who destroy property."

She had started to ride away when he spoke. Curiosity made her rein up and twist a little in the saddle, forcing her body into profile.

"Miss Lewis," Rezin said, "I don't like overbearing people. Go ahead—send over your riders. If they get here before I'm through eating, then they'll find me. If not" —he shrugged—"I'll still be in the country. You can describe me well enough so they'll know who they're looking for."

He took two steps forward as he shot his barb at her, and the little cloud of gray in his blue eyes spread opaquely.

He added, "And you might pass it on to your dad that the man you found over here is a man who was born in this house. He'll know, then, not to leave any seed around when he kills settlers for their land." His voice was soft and gentle—and vicious. It held the girl rooted to her saddle.

"This—this," she said uncertainly, "is the old Hartman place. My father bought it from those settlers twenty years ago. They left the country. You're—crazy! My father—"

Rezin slashed the air with his right hand in a peculiar way he had of doing when angry. "Listen, ma'am. If you think I'm lying, watch your dad's face when you tell him who I am. Tell him you met the last of the Hartmans this morning. Tell him Bull Antrim paid for his part in the Hartman massacre, and watch his face. You'll see guilt there, I reckon. If you're interested in looking for it." His eyes were bitter and flashing. "Now go on. Get the hell out of here!"

She didn't move. Horror was plating her features. "You killed Bull Antrim?"

Rezin nodded. "Yes'm. And I was even fool enough to give him an even chance for his miserable hide. I wish he'd been twins, so's it couldn't have ended so quick." He nodded curtly. "You might pass that along to your old man, too."

Faith Lewis reined away abruptly and spurred across the range. For a moment Rezin Hartman stared after her. Then he shrugged, and set about getting his breakfast. . . .

The sun was assailing the heat-hazed land with its slowly gathered momentum, but Faith Lewis scarcely felt the sun-blast. She rode full-tilt until she reached home. Dismounting, she tied her horse under a shaggy oak near the big C L barn and loosened the cinch. Then she walked toward the porch where her father and the new C L foreman, a man named Heber Kimball, were winding up a conversation.

The foreman touched his hat and walked away. Lewis turned toward his daughter with a smile.

"Out kind of early, ain't you, honey?"

"Dad," she said swiftly, "I rode over to the old Hartman place. There was a man camped there." Her father's beetling brows drew down. "He said to tell you he was the last of the Hartmans. He admitted he killed Bull Antrim.

She was watching him. She had more to say, but her tongue was imprisoned. Her father was white-faced and shaken. It sick-

ened her. Rezin had said, "Watch his face," and she was doing that, with a sinking sensation. Unable to speak, she started for the door.

Cliff Lewis asked hoarsely, "What's he look like, honey?"

She could answer that. "Tall, strong, with blue eyes—more of a smoky-gray—and bronze-gold hair. He—wears two guns and rides a grulla."

"You say he admitted killing Bull?"

"Yes. He made no secret of it."

"By God!" Cliff Lewis' face got red then, and his deep voice rumbled so that the cowboys down by the barn and corrals looked over, questioningly. "Dexter Williams'll want to know about him!"

LEWIS headed down off the porch and across the sun-spanked yard toward his riders. Faith's eyes were on him as she listened to the music of his spurs. She heard him bellowing orders.

"Heber—you ride for Buckrum. Fetch Dexter Williams out here. Tell him I know who killed Antrim. Bring him to the old Hartman place and meet us there. Get going!"

The foreman loped toward the saddle-rack for his gear. Lewis barked to the remaining four riders:

"Saddle up, boys! We'll go over and entertain this killer till Dexter gets there."

Faith, fully conscious of the sudden excitement among the C L crew knew instantly that trouble was coming. And, oddly, she couldn't forget the set look on the face of the man who had said he was a Hartman. But right or wrong, she knew none of these C L men would back up.

She spun away from the door as her father loped out of the yard at the head of his riders, ran to her own horse, tugged up the cinch and swung into saddle. There was only one way to beat them to the Hartman place, so she took it, galloping across the range toward where a bulwark of slag and granite brooded sullenly. This separated the old Hartman place from the C L Craggy old Razorback.

As Faith rode, she prayed that Dexter Williams would come fast. Sheriff Williams was a fair man, and a calm one. Her father was not calm. Nor was she as she galloped on with a prayer in her heart. . . .

While Faith had been talking to Rezin Hartman, Sheriff Williams, in Buckrum, with no inkling of trouble brewing on the C L, had been studying Owl Russel who was standing at the bar in the Parker House saloon. The lawman had just asked the gunslinger a question. Owl kept his black eyes on the sheriff for a full count of five without answering. Then he spoke.

"I settle my own affairs."

Dexter thought this over, shrugged, and nodded to the bartender. Frosty, they called him.

"Beer," Williams said quietly, then looked back at Russel.

Deputy Berl Clausen was leaning beside his boss at the bar, looking gravely at the big gold nugget Con Purdy wore as a watch fob.

The sheriff said to Owl, still quietly, "We don't tolerate no trouble in Buckrum, mister. Any that starts here, we make our affair. If you don't want to sign a complaint, that's your business, but don't start no trouble here."

He shoved up to the bar. Frosty set the beer down. The sheriff ignored Owl Russel and sipped it. Clausen was still staring at Conseil's nugget when he saw the hotel and saloonman start violently. The deputy looked up into the man's face mildly.

"Something bite you, Con?"

"No." But Con Purdy was excited. His muddy eyes were bright. "Listen, Dexter—I just thought! That hombre that done the beating up was sitting with Burt Hunt. I remember seeing him there before the fight started. I recall it now." There were beads of sweat on Con's upper lip. "Go ask Burt who he was. He ought to know."

Dexter Williams finished his beer, laid a lean hand across the foamy edge of his handlebar mustache, and nodded. Jerking his head toward the door at Berl, the sheriff's cold eyes raked over Owl Russel again, unpleasantly. He got stare for stare, then the lawmen left the saloon, deserted by others as yet this early in the morning. In apparent agitation as the lawmen left, Con Purdy touched Owl's sleeve, that was stiff with

dried blood and filth. Owl jerked away irritably.

"Keep your hands to yourself!"

"Lissen, Russel," the saloonman pleaded. "There's a thousand dollars in gold for you if you find that feller that beat you up and kill him before the sheriff gets him to talk."

Russel's reptilian eyes widened slightly through the puffy ruin of his scabbed-over face. "For hell's sake!" But the amount offered startled him. In his code, no man was worth more than five-hundred, dead. Not even a territorial governor. The black eyes pinpointed. "Why's he so valuable?"

CON chewed savagely at the torn flesh inside his cheek. "I'm—not sure. But I think his name might be—Hartman! I just remembered there was a kid. He'd be about this hombre's age, now." The muddy eyes were alive with suspicion and dread. "He was with Burt Hunt. Burt'd be his uncle."

Owl was twisting his whisky mash, his after-breakfast drink, carefully on the bartop. It only vaguely made sense to him. Evidently Con Purdy had done something some time or other, and this hombre named Hartman might be riding the backtrails for revenge. That was all interesting, but beside the point. He'd intended to kill the man anyway for the beating he'd handed him. One thousand dollars just clinched it.

"Get the money," he growled.

Con's agitation increased. "How do you know you'll get him?"

"You didn't ask me that about the Indian."

"This one's different. He's *got* to be killed. Got to be shut up before he talks to Dexter—or to Cliff Lewis."

"Who's Lewis?"

"It don't matter. Wait here."

As Con hustled toward his office, Owl shrugged and jerked his hand at the bartender. "Another one."

He got it, drank slowly, and felt the liquor subdue the crawling of his raw nerves.

"Frosty," he asked suddenly, "Where's Liza?"

The bartender jerked his head toward the upstairs landing. "In her room, I reckon. Third one to the left of the landing."

He looked up at Owl, speculated on whether to add anything, decided not to, and went down the deserted bar slapping at flies with a sour bar rag.

Owl watched his unerring aim idly. He remarked, as idly, "She'll be sore, after last night."

The bartender shrugged. He wasn't to be drawn into any differences with Owl Russel. "She asked for it," was all he said.

IV

OWL finished his drink and turned to accept the roll of money Con Purdy held out to him, low, so the bartender wouldn't see it. Owl wouldn't bother counting it. It was like found money, anyway. Since he had already made up his mind to kill Rezin Hartman on sight.

He turned away abruptly and walked out of the saloon, his tied-down guns moving rhythmically, to accent the animal grace of his walk, even in high heels. The bartender stopped swatting flies long enough to cast a calculating glance after him. Frosty had served a lot of killers in his time and never failed to tally them. Owl Russel, he decided, was about the coldest, most dangerous one he'd ever seen.

He switched his wooden inspection gaze to Conseil Purdy. The boss' face was pallid, in spite of his dark skin, and he was furiously chewing the inside of his cheek. Frosty smelled disaster. . . .

Owl Russel was swinging out of the livery barn, heading southwest, as the C L foreman, Heber Kimball, stepped down from his saddle at Dexter Williams' office. Kimball took notice of the swarthy gunman with only casual interest. He'd been in the saloon the night before and seen that breed battered senseless, which had not added to the man's stature as a gunslinger.

Russel didn't see the C L foreman, and if he had it wouldn't have made any difference. Cowhands were beneath his notice. In fact, he considered all mankind beneath him. Offspring of a drunken squaw and a white pelt dealer, he'd learned that the world had no use for breed kids. No hand had offered help, and hate had kept him alive. It still was keeping him alive. Hate—and the men who

hired gunmen to murder, because of it.

He thought over what the hostler at the livery had told him. Hearing the name Hartman had brought the old devil into abrupt sobriety. Owl grinned mirthlessly as he recalled how he had let the old fellow think he was for the Hartmans.

It had been easy to fit the pieces together. The hostler vividly remembered that Hartman and his wife had been killed on their ranch. He remembered, too, that ugly rumors had gone around about who had done it. And he had talked himself hoarse with recollections.

Owl had it all now, and when he had walked out of the saloon after his talk with the sheriff he hadn't even known the name of the man he was going to kill for Con Purdy—and himself. He had only been sure he would run into the man he wanted sooner or later.

Then he had run into Con after the law had had a talk with that old hombre, Burt Hunt, and Con had told him that yellow-haired gunslinger's name was Hartman. Owl hadn't even asked Con any questions. That hostler had done the rest, and Owl Russel was in luck, he knew the Hartman story, knew about the old Hartman ranch—

And now he was riding toward that ranch, sure he'd find Hartman there, and kill him. A pleasant way to earn a thousand dollars.

While Owl rode on, his thoughts gloating ones, back in Buckrum Sheriff Dexter Williams, in his office, didn't say anything until Heber Kimball finished with what he had come to report. Then the lawman grunted and looked over at his deputy. Clausen was braiding some skived edges of skirting he'd picked up at the saddle shop, listening, but apparently disinterested.

"Hartman, huh?" Williams repeated, and nodded slowly. "There used to be some talk about that place after the owner were killed by Indians, they say, or maybe drifters. Rumors, Heber. Before my time." He pushed out of his chair. "Well, we might as well ride. Maybe we'll uncover what all that old talk was about." He reached for his hat, automatically ran a hand around the ample ammo in his cartridge loops, and put on the hat. "Folks used to *say* it was renegades killed them Hartmans. I don't know. Must've been all of twenty years ago. All I recollect for sure is that when Cliff Lewis bought the place he posted it with signs and it's been C L range ever since. . . ."

Rezin Hartman was saddling up when he heard a horse racing down the abandoned buggy trail. He tossed up the reins and waited. But he was in for a surprise, and perplexed when Faith Lewis swept into the yard and set her horse up in a pebble-flinging slide. He saw that the animal had been ridden to the limit, and raised his eyes to the girl's face.

She was panting as her words came gushing out.

"You've got to ride! They're coming."

He stood hipshot, looking up at her. "Who, ma'am?"

"My father and four C L riders! They're coming around Razorback on the trail. I cut over. Had to! You—"

"That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" Rezin's eyes clouded. "If you hadn't told them, they wouldn't be on their way, would they?"

She Had Her Reasons

There was a young cowgal of Whitty,
Courageous, curvacious and pretty—
Said she, "I don't fear
Coyotes, lizards or deer,
But only those wolves from the city!"

by Pecos Pete

SHE glanced over her shoulder, saw nothing, and swung back.

"Don't argue. Ride! Go away!"

"Your dad's mad, huh? Maybe he didn't get mad right away, though. Maybe he was sort of startled at first?" Rezin's eyes drifted over the still, hot land, then back to the girl. "Why kill a horse to ride over here?"

"I shouldn't have done it!" she burst out. "Told Dad, I mean."

"He didn't like a Hartman being alive, did he?"

She lied poorly. "He was just mad. Anyway, *he* couldn't know anything about the Hartmans being killed!"

Rezin shook his head slowly. "You're not a good liar, Miss Lewis." As he saw the pulse-beat in her neck he felt strange stirrings within himself. She was beautiful.

"I didn't come back to the Brazitos for anything but trouble," he told her calmly. "Your law here never did anything, so that left it up to me. My mother had a brother here. Uncle Burt. Even he didn't do anything when she and my pa were shot down, right here in this yard. Twenty years is a long time, Miss Lewis, but I've never forgotten. Though somebody—I don't know who—sent me away to live with some nesters. I ran away, soon as I was old enough." His eyes drifted beyond her to a small bunch of riders coming slowly into view in the shimmering distance. "Now I'm here. Let's get it over with." He jutted his chin. "That your pa and his riders?"

Faith quickly studied the dark blot and a ragged sigh left her lips. "Yes. Oh, please go—please, Mr. Hartman!" Her eyes were desperate. "Let me—I'll find out anything for you. I can do it easier. Better. I'll find out the whole story. The truth! I'll tell you everything! If you stay now, there'll be a fight. Someone'll get killed! Please! Don't start a war until you're sure who did that terrible thing!"

She was leaning forward, looking down at him. Their eyes locked. He stepped closer on a sudden impulse and, totally ignoring the oncoming riders, he reached up roughly. Holding her by the shoulders, he kissed her squarely on the mouth. As abruptly he stepped back, with a brick-red face. She caught her breath, and if she had meant to say anything, she didn't. They stared at each other in vast surprise. Suddenly he nodded.

"All right. I'll give you today and tonight. Bring the whole story here at dawn tomorrow."

"Here? Won't they—"

Rezin shook his head, already a little sorry he'd given in to her pleas. "If they think I've been chased away they won't hardly expect me to circle back and bed down where they know I can't stay. Anyway, let's risk it."

He could make out individual riders now. Four of them, with thick-chested old Cliff Lewis in the lead making five. Swiftly he swung to saddle and reined in close beside Faith.

"Miss Lewis, you've got about twenty-four hours to find out the truth about something that's been buried for that many years. I don't reckon you can do it." He nodded curtly, kneed the grulla past her and rode off in a long, easy lope.

A faint shout came down the molten air to him. He looked back, saw Faith sitting like a statue in the weedy yard of the old ranch that had belonged to his folks. The C L riders, following Cliff Lewis, were coming after him, but the grulla ate up the miles with indifference.

It was blazing hot as Rezin rode. The sun above him was scorching, but it also was scorching far beyond his vision, on the trail where Dexter Williams, Berl Clausen, and Heber Kimball were riding slowly over the Sprawling C L range.

The sheriff was thoughtful, and he was speaking his thoughts to his saddle partners.

"Burt Hunt," he said, "is a good man. Maybe not a gun-packing gent, maybe something of a coward." He shrugged. "That's nothing against him. Not to me any more it ain't. There was a day I thought different. Age makes changes, I reckon. Anyway, from the looks of Burt, when we spoke to him, I'd say he's been spending the last few nights walking the floor."

BERL worried off a sliver of Day's Work, deftly worked it up into just the right position in his mouth, then spoke. "Old

Burt's no liar. When he said he tried to talk this nephew—this here Rezin Hartman hombre—out of gunning for the killers of his ma and pa, he was telling the truth." He spat, and went on, "And just between us fellers, I'd be mighty apt to act the same way Hartman is, if my folks had been cut down without a chance, and the law didn't do nothing." He eyed the C L foreman carefully. "How about you, Heber?"

The foreman nodded slowly. "It's a hell of a fix for any man to be in, all right." He reached forward and swept some loose mane wisps onto the proper side. "And I wouldn't put it past Bull Antrim to do a killing, either. He was pretty hard, you know."

"Settled down a lot, though, in the last ten years." Dexter said.

"So's the country, Dex," Heber said. "And Bull was crowding fifty. Like you said, a man quiets down when he gets a little older and stiffer."

The sheriff smiled. "I know it. I'm past forty now, myself."

Berl looked at the sheriff. "Well, then, this Hartman's not plumb out of line, is he? I mean, him larruping that breed the other night in Con's place sort of put me a mite on his side."

Sheriff Williams' smile slid away. He looked stonily over the cattle-dotted C L range. "Lawmen don't take sides, Berl."

The C L foreman grinned slightly, thought it over, and laughed out loud. Berl laughed wryly, and finally Dexter Williams wagged his head with a dry chuckle.

"All right—have it your way. Antrim had it coming, and I know it as well as you fellers do. Maybe I was even a little glad that he finally got paid off, too. Still, this Hartman's got no call to go riding around the Brazitos killing folks." He flipped a bead of sweat off his long nose. "Especially in the summer, and I got to ride after him when it's a hundred and ten in the shade."

They all laughed again. Then suddenly Williams' arm swept up.

"There's a rider. Who you reckon it is?"

Heber Kimball squinted out from under his hat brim. "Damned if I know. It's no C L man, I know that. We haven't got any grullas."

Berl Clausen swore in monumental disgust. "He's too far ahead for us to catch him."

"Sure he is," Williams said, with a quick glance at his deputy. "This heat'll kill a horse in a run. Why? What difference does it make?"

"Oh, nothing, Berl said sarcastically. "Only, that's Hartman. I know the horse. Seen it at the livery." He swore feelingly. "So we rode all the way out here for nothing."

Sheriff Williams reined up and watched the distant rider with narrowed eyes. Kimball swore with eloquence and blistering vigor. But Rezin Hartman rode on into the vastness of the land and became enveloped in the heat waves until he disappeared.

"To hell with this," the sheriff said. "As long as we're this close, let's ride on over to the old Hartman place and get a drink from that well. Best water in the country." They shook out their reins and rode on.

Heber Kimball said, frowning, "I wonder how he got away from Cliff? The old man sure was bravo when I left this morning. Cliff Lewis is no man to cross, either. Can't figure it out."

V

LEWIS sat his horse like a graven image. He even forgot to ride into the shade. He sat there and stared at his daughter. The C L crew rode embarrassedly over by the spring into shade from the massive log walls, where they could get water. They were beyond the sound of the father's voice when he said:

"I'll be damned, Faith. Why?"

"Because I didn't want anyone to get killed," she said flatly. "I shouldn't have told you about him."

Lewis leaned forward. His eyes were cold and hard. "Faith," he accused. "You've let a killer get away."

She didn't drop her eyes. "Dad, why did you keep Bull Antrim on the C L? I've heard you say, a dozen times, he was a poor cowman. Why did you keep him?" Lewis didn't answer. Faith drew strength from his silence. "*Did* he have a hand in the killing of those settlers?" she demanded. "Those

Hartmans? Is that why you kept him, Dad? So he'd keep what he knew to himself If that's why, Dad, then you had to know something about their murder, too."

"Faith!"

It hurt her, too. It was like being stabbed and having the knife twisted, saying those things to the man who had been both father and mother to her. But she had to know.

Their eyes remained locked for a long ten seconds. Cliff Lewis' mouth showed little splotches of white at the corners, as it always did when he was shocked or angry. Faith didn't quail before his wooden stare, though.

"Well?" she asked.

He shook himself like a big dog, before he spoke. "Listen, Faith," he said then, "I had no hand in killing them people. I came here thirty years ago and bought the land that is now C L Ranch because I knew it was too much to hope that open range would last. That's why *I'm* here, and other old-timers who were my friends are not. The Hartmans bought their land, too. Then they was killed. In those days this was pretty wild country, and at first folks laid their killing to Injuns. I never asked, not even when two men came to me with a deed to the place, signed by Birch Hartman. They offered me the land. It adjoined what I owned, so I bought it.

"Then other rumors started. Folks began to say Injuns hadn't been the Hartman killers at all. All I knew, all anybody knew for sure was that Birch Hartman and his wife were dead and buried—over there by the well. Where the boys' horses are standing now." He looked back at Faith. "Folks have got to gossip, Faith. I even got to hearing I'd killed the Hartmans to get their land. First, it made me sore, then I was just scornful, then, by jingoes, I noticed that folks whose land bordered mine would get uneasy and sell out whenever I asked if they would."

He finally let his eyes drop. His daughter had nothing to say—no comment, no questions. He roused himself and went on:

"Look here, honey! I never shot no man in cold blood, and I never shot a woman, no matter what. Before God, Faith, I never did! But as long as I'd been given the name, the game—" The hard eyes swung back. "That's how I got the C L range." He shrugged. "Maybe it was sort of unethical, but I don't look at it that way. I call it being smart enough to see your chance and taking it. You see? Making the best of things and not waiting for prayers to be answered." He looked straight at her. "Now you know the whole story, honey. All of it."

"Who were the men you bought this place from?"

"Bull Antrim was one of them."

"Then this Hartman is right. But how could he know Bull had had anything to do with the killing of his parents?"

Her father shrugged again. "That's not hard to figure. Young Hartman's got an uncle in Buckrum. Name of Burt Hunt. Runs the abstract office. Fast is, he made out my deed. He must've suspicioned something, but he never said nothing. This young Hartman could've found out from his uncle. I just barely recall there was a boy, never knew what become of him. He was just a button then. I—"

"Who was the other man?" Faith persisted. "The one with Bull?"

"I never saw him up close. Him and Bull come to the ranch in a buggy. Never even had any idea *who* he was."

FAITH'S mind filtered the facts swiftly. She saw three men riding toward them across the range, but her only interest was in what her father was saying. She asked him:

"Didn't anyone witness the Hartman killings? Wasn't there anything for the law to go on?"

Lewis snorted. "Those days, Faith, there wasn't no law. Gun law was about all. No, there was just this little kid and an Injun kid the Hartmans had found somewhere—" He stopped suddenly and straightened slowly in his saddle. "Hell!" he breathed. His eyes went through Faith and beyond her. "There was a Digger Injun killed hereabouts the same day as Bull was. They used to call him Porky John. Could've been the Hartmans' Injun kid, grown up." He frowned in perplexity. "But this Hartman couldn't have done that. Bull and the Digger

was killed at about the same time, but fifteen miles apart. Couldn't of been this Hartman hombre. Besides, the Digger couldn't of known anything dangerous to anybody, or else why did he keep shut for twenty years?"

Lewis turned his head as he heard the shuffling gait of heat-soggy horses. His foreman was riding up with the sheriff and his deputy, Berl Clausen. Lewis' mouth set grimly as the sheriff rode up to him and reined in. The deputy and the foreman nodded and rode on toward the spring-fed well.

"Afternoon, folks."

"Howdy, Sheriff," Lewis grunted. "He's gone."

The officer nodded. "I know. We saw him riding away. Too far off for us to chase him in this heat." He looked inquiringly at Lewis. "Now what?"

"Dex," Lewis asked, "do you know who killed that Digger down by the river?"

"No, but I'd like to. Maybe this Hartman hombre did."

"No," Lewis said, "it couldn't of been Hartman." He explained why, and the sheriff listened without speaking, nodded, and reined away.

"Need a drink. See you in a minute."

Lewis turned back to Faith, studied his daughter woodenly. "I'm sorry, honey. Maybe you'll never understand. Times have changed. What was plain good sense yesterday seems sort of unlawful today. The frontier wasn't an easy place when I come here. Remember that, when you judge me in this thing." He stared a little longer at her lovely face, the features so like a soft, feminine replica of his own, then jerked his head backward. "Go on home, honey. I'll be along with the boys directly. When we've got this business figured out." He smiled wistfully. "Make us a big stew. We'll be mighty hungry."

Wordlessly Faith reined around and rode past her father, out of the trampled yard and homeward. She thought of Rezin Hartman and of his bitter doubt that she would find out anything in twenty hours, when no one else had found a hint in twenty years.

Then she remembered his kiss, and felt the hot flush that mounted in her cheeks. It was at that moment that she caught sight of a big black horse going toward the Hartman place, wondered who the rider was.

She wouldn't have recognized the rider, anyway, because Owl Russel was a stranger to her, but if she had been nearer she would have seen that he reined up some distance from the Hartman ranch house.

Owl had good reason to rein up, and pronto. For what he saw ahead were eight horses bunched, heads down and drowsing in the shade cast by the old log house.

He watched for a full five minutes, and cursed. Either Hartman had friends in this country, or somebody had beaten him, Owl, to the ranch and his prey. Uncomfortable under the brassy sun, he swore again, reined around and headed back toward Buckrum. Experience had taught him to be patient. He curled his lip. He'd wait.

Twisting back in the saddle before he was out of sight, he saw four riders leave the place and head down toward Razorback. Probably C L cowhands, he thought.

THEY were. For Cliff Lewis had sent the four hands back to the home ranch. He kept Heber Kimball with him. He and his foreman sat with the sheriff and his deputy in the coolness furnished by the log walls as he told the law bluntly and frankly all he had told Faith. It wasn't easy, because Lewis was not an humble man. But he told it anyhow.

Berl and Heber were plainly embarrassed, but Dexter Williams listened soberly and whittled on a twig with his jackknife until the rancher finished, then he sighed, pocketed the knife and looked up.

"Yeah. That's the way the land was them days. I know. I wasn't much more'n a button, but even so, I remember some of it." He looked past Lewis at the house. "Well, as far as I can see, Cliff, you haven't done anything exactly wrong." He got up, stretched, and walked over to his horse. "I wouldn't want to be in your boots with Faith, though." He tightened his cinch. "Come on, Berl. We've got to find this Hartman hombre before he kills some other damned fool. If we're lucky we can stop him before he goes so far nothing will save

him." He swung up and repeated softly, "If we're lucky." He was looking at Cliff Lewis. "One thing you never did make clear, Cliff. Why *did* you keep Bull Antrim around?"

Lewis squirmed slightly. "Because I figured he knew the truth about the Hartman killings. And I didn't want him mixing me up in them because I bought the land."

"Did you ever ask him?"

Lewis' eyes slid away from Williams' face. He shook his head. "No, I never did. I cant' exactly say why I didn't, either. Maybe because I was afraid of what he would have told me." He sighed, and arose too. "I always figured to do it, though, some day. But I never did."

Dexter eyed the big old man thoughtfully. "You knew—if it was murder—that their kid should get the ranch." He spoke slowly, almost gently. "You didn't want to give it up, did you? Not even to an orphaned kid."

Lewis' mouth showed the white splotches around the edges. "I reckon you're right, Dex." It cost a lot to put his finger openly on the one thing he'd been denying to himself for twenty years.

Sheriff Williams regarded the wealthy rancher in silence until Berl Clausen was mounted and ready to ride. Then, without another word, he reined around and rode out of the yard behind his deputy.

Lewis and Kimball rode homeward. The foreman wanted to say something to show that he understood, but couldn't for the life of him think of anything appropriate. They rode back to the C L in silence.

Kimball thought he'd ride to Buckrum after dark, and wash the taste of the whole business out of his mouth. He also thought of Con Purdy's singer, Eliza Bent, and licked his chapped lips. She was a big bundle of woman. All woman. He smiled slightly as he thought of her, and of how she would sing tonight.

And Heber Kimball was right. He did ride to Buckrum, and Eliza did sing, but she sang to a hushed crowd that jammed the Parker House saloon. Once when she noticed Con Purdy over against the wall by his office she wondered why he didn't break himself of that silly habit of chewing the inside of his cheek. He'd been doing it every time she'd seen him this evening.

Her eyes slid off Con and over the cowmen. Her gaze faltered, fled wildly, then sneaked back to the burly, swarthy man at a wall table nursing a whisky mash and eying her with a cold smile.

The music stopped and the customers stamped their booted feet and yelled for more. Eliza scooped up the silver that cascaded toward her, threw Owl Russel another glance and caught the beckoning curtness of his head. She looked away, nodded to the thin man at the piano, and went into another song.

IT WAS a hollow victory, though, because when the song ended she went over to Owl's table where he'd had a whisky set across from him. He had know she'd come. She had.

"Liza," he muttered, "it was the liquor." He wasn't smiling, but his jet eyes were hypnotic. He knew she half believed him because he could read it in her face.

"My dress was ruined," she said.

He shoved two hundred-dollar bills at her. Still there was no smile.

"You want to get married, Liza?"

Most women did. Owl didn't care. He'd marry her. They were the same type. He shrugged.

She was stunned. She sipped her whisky and looked at him over the rim of the glass. He was handsome, and always had money.

"You in a rush, Owl?"

"No. Not about—that. I'm just tired of this damn town. I want to get back where there's trees on the hillsides. Where there's shade. This is a damned desert. I'll be leaving in a day or two." He drained the last of his drink and shoved the glass away. "You got until tomorrow." He got up, picked up his hat, flicked it carelessly on his head, and smiled at her. "You're safe tonight. I got work to do."

He grunted as she blushed, and spun away from the table. Shoving through the customers contemptuously, he did not once glance back.

Con Purdy restrained himself from backing away as Owl approached him. The

man's eyes were bloodshot and it was plain that the liquor the gunman drank was beginning to wreck him. It could make him more dangerous.

"You find him?" the saloonman asked.

Owl shook his head and told about the horsemen at the Hartman place. "But I'll get him. Don't worry. I'm going back there tonight and scout the place. He's hanging out there all right."

Con asked, "You sure Hartman's grulla wasn't among them horses?"

"Sure," Owl lied. But he didn't care whether Hartman had talked to the sheriff or not.

"Well, hell, Russel! Get him before he talks to anybody."

Owl faced the man menacingly. His eyes were intent. "All right—Pardieu." He saw Purdy's startled look, and chuckled. "You damn fool, I recognized you the first day I got here. That notched ear. Conseil Pardieu. French-Canadian trapper who killed Siwash squaws and stole their pelts in the Sangamon twenty years ago. I got a good memory. One of them squaws was my aunt." He read the horror in Con's eyes and smirked. "Don't worry. I don't give a damn. She didn't mean nothing to me."

He turned away with a familiar feeling of contempt, pushed his way to the louvered doors and disappeared into the night.

Con Purdy watched his exit unblinkingly and tasted the blood he'd bitten through the flesh of his cheek. There was an ancient fever in him. He had to kill again! Owl Russel was more dangerous, alive, than the others now. He went into his office and locked the door. Dropping into a chair he buried his head in his hands, sobbing and cursing.

VI

REZIN came down the soft night like an apparition. He thought morosely that it was fitting the son should ride like a ghost into the haunted, violated home of the dead parents.

He was in a brooding, bitter frame of mind. He'd foolishly let a pretty girl make him waste a whole day. Prudently he rode on past the well and made his camp a hundred feet or so in back of the barn. The grulla accepted the hobbles stoically and began to graze, with little hops.

Rezin lay in his blankets for a long while, just thinking. The Lewis girl's pleading eyes kept interrupting other thoughts. When finally he slept, fitfully, he could see her staring at him over the lifeless body of her father, looking at the two smoking guns in his hands.

A loud wail shattered the night. Rezin stirred, in his dream consciousness thinking it was the girl. Then abruptly he was awake. He sat up with a pounding heart. The sound came again. He grinned shakily and reached for the tobacco sack in his shirt pocket. A coyote. When the howl came again, it was farther away.

He finished fashioning the cigarette and stuck it in his mouth—and froze where he sat. The distinct sound of a shod horse's feet striking rock floated to him through the darkness. He wanted to believe it was his grulla, but knew better. The grulla was hobbled.

Swiftly Rezin grabbed his saddle and blanket and scuttled to a nearby copse of sagebrush. He hunkered there, listening, the unlighted cigarette dangling from his lips. What little moon there had been, had slid into eternity.

The sound was unmistakable now. A horse and rider were coming closer. Leaving his saddle in the brush, he crept closer to the clearing, behind the buildings. It couldn't be the Lewis girl. It was too soon to expect her to have ferreted out any news for him. He couldn't see his watch, but a study of the horizon made it close to four oclock.

A rider swung into the yard, sat his saddle for a second, then swung down. Rezin prayed that the grulla wouldn't nicker. He peered through the darkness, trying to recognize his visitor. But the distance was too great.

He lay belly flat and began to squirm through the rank grass, eyes glued to the stranger's silhouette as the fellow studied the ground, straightened once or twice, stared at the house, then walked slowly over to the well, his spurs making small music in the night. Rezin lay still.

Owl Russel could make out the tracks all right even in that dim light. He read sense into them, too. He couldn't piece it all together, but he filled in what he couldn't make out with fair accuracy, and pursed his lips in a dry whistle. He knew what had happened here tonight. Fishing out his tobacco, he made a cigarette, thumbed a match and cupped it to his face. Rezin knew him then.

Russel studied the ranch house as the bits he had guessed came together in his mind. And of one thing he now was sure. Some way, somehow, Conseil Pardieu knew the truth about the killing of those settlers so long ago, the settlers who had lived here. He smoked in silence for awhile, then moving forward easily, he entered the house. He looked around with disinterest and soon went back outside, when he smelled the coming dawn.

He walked to his horse and swung up. He had no plan, but he knew more now than when he'd ridden in. He reined back through the hole where a gate had been and turned eastward along the ghostly outline of an old buggy trace, riding slowly and thoughtfully.

Rezin Hartman watched Owl Russel until he couldn't see him any longer, and listened to the hoof-beats until they died away. The dagger of dawn now was slicing neatly through the swollen belly of the night, over on the horizon. He was moving stealthily back down past the barn to the house when he heard the sound of a galloping horse, and went into the long shadows beside the well, once more waiting. . . .

FAITH LEWIS hadn't slept at all. She'd tried, and couldn't. So she had slipped out, saddled her horse and ridden off into the night. Now, as the old Hartman place loomed up, she slowed to a walk, feeling uneasy. She rode through the gate and halted. Fingers of fear gripped her heart.

"Good morning, Miss Lewis."

She ignored the greeting, spurred over by the well and let go a torrent of words. She told Rezin everything her father had told her, and he listened, wooden-faced, and nodding only twice. When she finished, neither of them said anything for a long time. The coyote gave tongue again, but he was far off now. Rezin rolled another cigarette. In a way, he was relieved. In another way, he knew little more than he had before.

"I was wrong then, wasn't I?" he murmured.

"You mean that I couldn't find out anything?"

He nodded. "Yes. That, and something else that I thought."

"That Dad was in on it? That he—"

"Yeah. That he had a hand in the killing of my folks." He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I'm glad he didn't."

"Yes," she said simply, "I am too."

"For your sake, I'm glad."

She understood and uneasily changed the subject. "What can you do? No one knows who the other man with Bull was."

"I'll find him."

He was holding the cigarette, inhaling again, when a third voice blended in.

"I know who he was."

Rezin stiffened and turned his head. Faith was petrified in her saddle. Owl Russel was standing not twenty feet from them, his spurs shed and his hat back so that the false dawn limned the dark luster of his obsidian eyes. Rezin gauged his chances, saw Russel's hands were clawed and ready, and relaxed.

"What do *you* know about it?" he demanded.

Owl didn't move his body. Just inclined his head a little. "I know who the other killer was." He'd heard Faith's horse loping in the still night and had followed her back.

Rezin jerked his head in scorn. "You're lying."

Russel shook his head. "I'll tell you, hombre, if the girl will move away. You can take the knowledge to hell with you. It might do some good down there. It won't up here."

Rezin understood the man, all right. Owl meant to kill him. It was no surprise. Without taking his eyes from Owl's outline in the chill night, he said to Faith:

"Ride, Miss Lewis. I want to know this, before I slide over the brink."

She didn't move. A dagger of ice was stabbing her. "No!" She looked at Owl Russel. "Don't do it! Give him a chance."

The gunman didn't take his eyes off Rezin

when he answered her. "He's got a chance, ma'am. A damned slim one, but it's a chance. He's armed." This was one man he didn't want to shoot from behind. He wanted to watch this one go down spitting out his life-blood. "Go ahead—ride away. Hartman ought to know who the other hombre was who drygulched his folks. I like the idea of him knowing what he's tried so hard to find out, and not being able to do anything about it."

Rezin's arm was aching from holding the cigarette close to his face. He dropped it but knew better than to move a muscle, much less drop his arm. He had a chance, like the breed said. Not an even one, by a long shot, but it was better than he would have expected from this killer. He thought fast. If the girl would speak to Russel again, it might provide a slight diversion. Anything counted right then

Faith shook her head vehemently. She said, "He doesn't need to know it. It—it can't do any good. There'll only be another killing."

Faith, too, was thinking fast and desperately. Her decision was made on the spur of the moment. She rammed a heel into her horse's ribs. The startled animal lunged wildly ahead, between the men. Owl Russel cursed and drew. Rezin's right arm was useless with the ache of its suspension and he fumbled his draw with it, but the left hand swooped like a hawk.

Three guns blasted simultaneously!

Faith's horse shuddered convulsively and collapsed, its heart riddled. She fell forward, swinging herself free and lying prone. The guns roared again, then just one gun fired a third time, and then stillness closed in.

REZIN was leaning against the log house now, his eyes never leaving Owl Russel. The breed was rolling off his back, trying to twist for another shot. His shirt front was sticky and scarlet. Rezin pushed himself off the house and walked toward the killer, gun cocked. Owl tried again, grunted, and spat blood from the effort. Sensing his futility he lay back as death came closer.

Rezin held his fire, let the gun sag, uncocked it, and dropped it into holster. He knelt beside the breed.

"You're pretty good, at that," he croaked.

Owl Russel looked up into the bloodless face. It struck him funny. Hartman telling him he was pretty good, when Hartman had downed *him*.

"No," he said. "Not too good. Otherwise you'd be here, not me." He tried to close his throat against the welter that was rising up, couldn't, and rolled his head weakly. Blood, frothy and salty tasting erupted violently, then subsided and let him roll his head back again. He even noticed that Hartman had been helping him with an arm. He wanted to shake away from the assistance, but couldn't.

"Yeah," Rezin said, "pretty good. One in the left arm. Broke it, I reckon. One in the side somewhere. I can feel it every time I breathe."

Owl Russel looked up unblinkingly. "Con Purdy, hombre."

"He's the other one?"

"Yeah. Now do me a favor."

"Sure."

"There's a wad of money in my pocket. Take it, and my guns—they're good friends. Give them to Liza."

"Liza?"

"Yes, damn it, Liza." For the last time corrosive violence was rampant in Owl Russel's soul. "Sings for Purdy." Something ironic made the glassy eyes flicker. "Purdy? Purdy, hell! His name is Pardieu. I know something else about him too. Didn't tell him, though. He's a squaw-killer—and he's also my father."

The gorge was rising again. Owl fought against it, lost his battle, and hemmorhaged to death in a convulsion that brought out a torrent of blood.

Rezin frowned and shook off the vortex of dizziness that was whirling crazily inside him as he pushed himself upright. Swaying there, he looked down at the dead gunman. Then he felt strong, supple arms holding him up. A soft voice spoke close to his ear.

"Lie down. I'll help you. Here—over here. Not there. The blood's there."

Faith supported him until his knees buckled, then she fought against his dead weight and eased him onto the grass and ripped off

his shirt. A raw, sodden slash was revealed, ragged and gory. She won over her faintness and used his shirt to fashion a bandage.

The sun had begun to warm the air, but the girl still shivered and cradled his bronze-gold head in her lap, brushing away the flies that hurried down upon them.

Faith only knew she had been sitting that way, holding Rezin, for what seemed like eternity when she saw six horsemen coming down the trail from the C L. Her father dismounted stiffly and came over to her with an ashen face.

"Send for the doctor, Dad. He's hurt."

"Who is he?"

"Hartman. They fought. He—killed the breed. Get someone riding for Buckrum!"

Cliff Lewis was stung out of his shock by what Faith said. He wheeled.

"Two you boys ride for Buckrum. Fetch the doctor and Dexter Williams."

He turned back, knelt beside Rezin and efficiently sliced through the awkward bandage and motioned Kimball closer.

"Fetch some of that spring water, Heber."

Faith moved away. Her legs were asleep and she staggered. Her father looked up at her quickly.

"You hurt, honey?" he asked. She shook her head.

Heber brought the water. Its coldness shocked Rezin into consciousness.

"You're Cliff Lewis," he mumbled.

"Yes. You're Hartman."

Rezin winced as Lewis sliced the ragged flesh away with his knife. "Bad?"

"About three broke ribs and a lot of ripped meat. Bled like a stuck pig, though, but not too serious."

LEWIS' hands shook violently, once, before he said, "Hartman, I owe you something."

"You've only got one thing I want, Lewis."

"Yeah. I know. I'll deed it back—"

"Not that, dammit."

Lewis paused and looked up, saw Rezin's eyes and his daughter's glance locked together, and stiffened with surprise. Then he went back to work on the wound.

"Anything you want, boy. Name it."

Rezin didn't answer. He didn't have to. He read his own answer in Faith Lewis' glance. Heber Kimball walked away. Looking at dead men didn't bother him half as much as looking at torn up live ones.

Aside from being as weak as a kitten, and with a burning thirst, Rezin felt pretty well by the time Dexter Williams and the little doctor arrived in the medico's buckboard. The sheriff looked at the dead man thoughtfully, then turned away. The doctor was talking to Rezin, but he was not listening.

Sheriff Williams came over with his slow, methodical stride and hunkered down beside him, looked at Cliff Lewis for a long time, then appraised Rezin and spoke.

"Funny thing happened just before I left Buckrum. As a matter of fact, that's what held us up for a while."

"Yeah?" Cliff Lewis' face was impassive and wary. "What?"

Williams took out his pocket knife and searched for a twig. Rezin brushed the doctor away irritably. He sensed something.

Dexter Williams spoke again in the deathly quiet. "Conseil Purdy hung himself in his office." No one spoke. Williams' eyes flashed to the dead breed briefly, then back to the whittled stick. "He left an envelope addressed to Owl Russel." The stick jutted toward the corpse. "He's that hombre over there. Liza told me." He closed the knife and fished out an envelope.

"Who'll I give it to, now?"

Rezin reached over, took the envelope, dug out a match, struck it and held it under the paper. No one said anything until the curled ashes dropped into the dead grass. Then Cliff Lewis got up.

"Like to borrow your buggy, Doc."

"Sure, Cliff. What for?"

Lewis jerked a thumb toward Rezin. "Got to tote Mr. Hartman here to the C L. He'll need some care for a week or so."

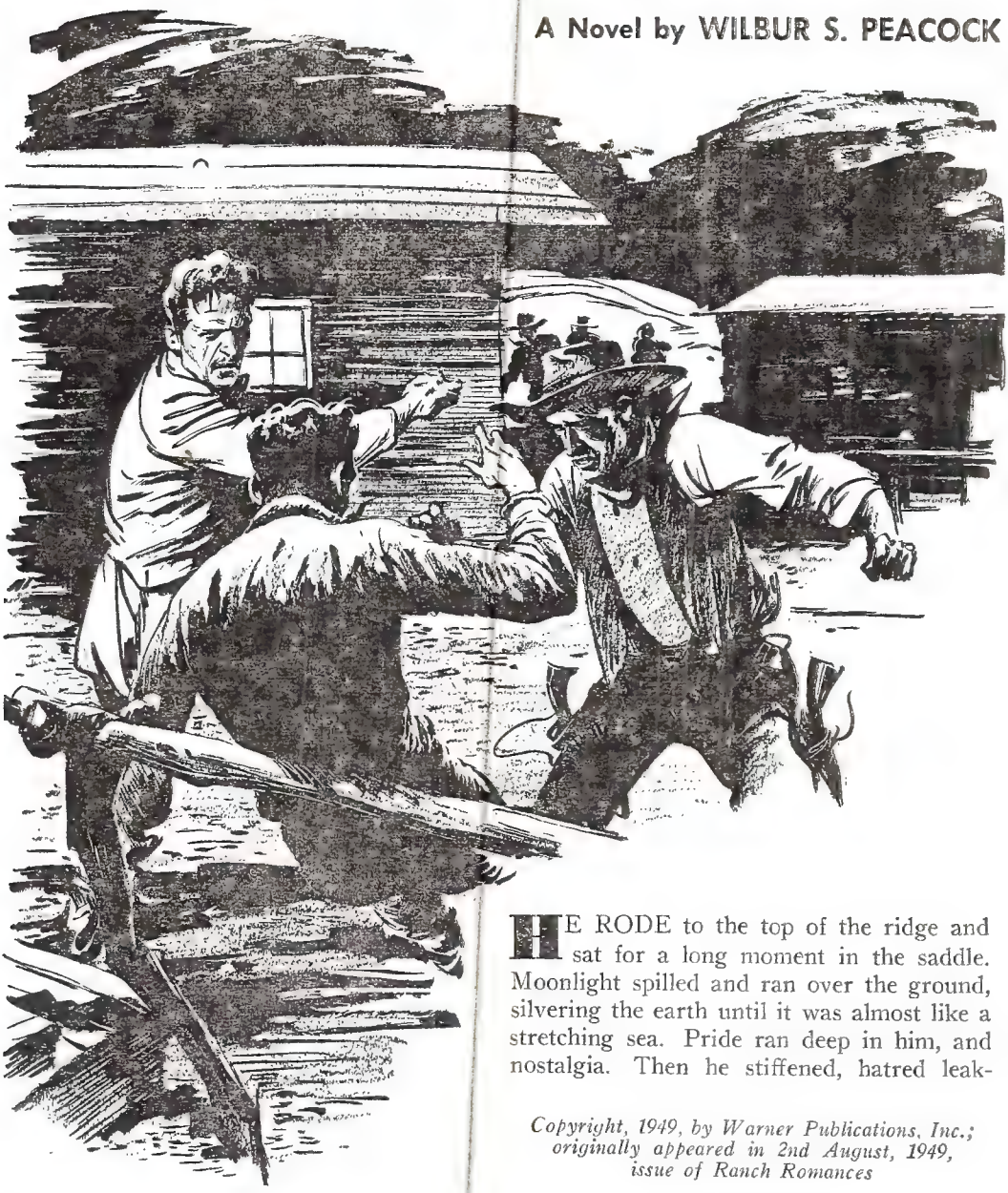
Rezin frowned. "No. I'll get a room in—"

"Please—" Faith sank to her knees beside him and laid a cool hand on his brow.

Rezin shut up and looked at her with the wonder of a man for a lovely woman who could care for him. Her eyes had that pleading, hopeful look. He blushed furiously and nodded at her, unmindful of the surprised glances that went around, over their heads.

Ride North

A Novel by WILBUR S. PEACOCK



HE RODE to the top of the ridge and sat for a long moment in the saddle. Moonlight spilled and ran over the ground, silvering the earth until it was almost like a stretching sea. Pride ran deep in him, and nostalgia. Then he stiffened, hatred leak-

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Vance well knew that pretty, meddling women meant bad trouble

ing through against those who lived here now.

Three years had passed since the judge had said, "It is the sentence of this court, Frederick Vance . . ." and he had ridden upstate to the penitentiary. Now, despite himself, excitement built in him, and his fingers trembled as he rolled and lit a cigarette. He forced calmness into his mind, his gaze centered on the ranch house far below. Dave Cutler was there, and now Cutler owned the Box T and most of this part of New Mexico.

Once this had been Vance land. It had come from father to son, growing, sprawling, and born of a Spanish grant given by the king. Cattle had grazed on the lush range, and coyotes had keened at the moon on lonely nights. It was an empire, self-governed and self-guarded, and its people had prospered.

And then had come men like the Jensens and the Cutlers and Broadbecks, crude, hungry men, their hands reaching out to grasp everything of value.

The fight had begun then, for the prize was rich. It had been bitter and brutal and marked with death. And slowly retreat had come for the Vances, for those from the East had money behind them, as well as political strings reaching into the capital. New laws had been passed, and then doubt cast upon the legality of the grant.

And when at last showdown had arrived, the land was no longer Vance land. A Cutler had died, and Frederick Vance's father, in a final range war. Then the Vances were the interlopers, and Dave Cutler was the victor.

There had been a trial, and Dave Cutler had proved his strength. For when the verdict came, Frederick Vance had been convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to prison.

Now, sitting his black, Fred Vance flicked his cigarette at the white bloom of a yucca and rode slowly toward the adobe house which had once been the home of a Mexican cowhand.

A stump resolved into a sleeping cow, and a rabbit broke cover, vanishing instantly. Saddle leather creaked sleepily, and Vance almost turned the horse on impulse to ride toward the mountain and away forever.

THEN a thought came and he stilled his rein hand. Catherine Sanders was here, and she had waited for three years. If for no other reason than to repay her loyalty, he must see her before he left again.

He remembered her, and breath quickened in his throat. Her hair was as golden as ripened wheat, and her lips had been warmly red and promising and eager for his. She was slim and vital, and she danced as lightly as a tumbleweed in a breeze.

Her letters had held him to the outside world at first, when the grim gates of the penitentiary had closed between him and all he knew. He had saved them, reading them and waiting for the days when he would be free to hear the words which she could not say aloud.

Then the letters had appeared less frequently, until none had arrived. After that there had been a void in time. Bitterness had come, vicious and ugly, and at last dejection and the knowledge that all was lost. He had not cared about anything, not even freedom, and something had died in his heart which he had never thought to lose.

And then the explanation had arrived, a note written and enclosed with a dozen letters. Catherine had explained, and the sheet had been marked with her tears. Clare, her brother, had intercepted the letters, and she had discovered his trickery only a few days before. Fred Vance had understood, and had ridden back to the land which had been his but now belonged to others.

The adobe house came up out of the night, and he reined in and slid from the saddle. He tug-knotted the reins at a broken post. There was only the house and a well in a weed-grown yard.

He pushed through the door, the panel creaking protest, and a thumb-scratched match guttered and disclosed a broken lamp upon the table. Oil was still in it, and he lit the wick. He turned slowly, distaste in him for the makeshift stove and crude bunk and the chairs which were really half-barrels sawed across. There was a table and a sacking curtain. Except for those, and

three crude shelves, the room was empty and dirty.

"Welcome home!" he whispered in wry mockery to the walls.

He went outside and unsaddled, hobbling the black, then carried saddle and bags into the house. Building a fire in the stove, he caught up a rusty pail and drew water at the well. Returning, he placed the pail on the stove to heat.

He felt the breeze before he heard the sound. And then he was turning slowly, gray eyes suddenly narrowed. Caution stilled thoughts for a moment, and he was conscious of the lack of gun weight at his hip.

"Who are you?" he asked steadily.

She was dark, her hair wind-blown beneath the small trim stetson. Her figure was almost boyish in the split riding skirt, and her hands were gloved with bright red and green beading against the buckskin. A riding quirt dangled in one hand, and she flicked it in slow impatience.

"You've five minutes to get off this land," she said.

"Five—" Fred Vance laughed then, and it was the first laugh to come naturally in more than three years. "Look, miss," he said, "I don't know who you are and I don't give a damn. This is my land, and I propose to stay."

"Your . . . Then you're Fred Vance!"

"He's Vance," a heavy voice said, and a man came past the girl, overshadowing her.

He dwarfed the room. Gray lay in his hair, and his mustache was neat and trim. Softness was coming to the hard outlines of his body, but his shoulders were still square, and his lips grim with sureness.

"Hello, Cutler," Vance said, and hair stirred uneasily on his neck.

"We saw the light and came to take a look-see," Cutler said, and indecision lay in him. "We knew you were out, but never figured you'd show back this way again."

"Why so sure?" Vance asked, and waited for the anger to boil upward in him as it had done before.

THEN he knew it was not coming. There was no anger, no surging of hatred. There was only a deadness, a weariness which he could not explain.

"You're not welcome," Cutler said bluntly. "This isn't your spread any more." His gaze dropped to Vance's waist. "Softening up?" he finished. "No gun?"

"I'm on parole," Vance said softly. "I can't wear guns."

"You can't—" Dave Cutler laughed then, and the sound was booming and ugly.

Vance's hand closed slowly. "You've had your laugh, now get out," he said thinly.

His eyes went to the girl, and he felt the slow beat of blood at his temples. There was a quickening in him, something he could not analyze.

"All right, we're going," Dave Cutler said. "But before we do, I think I'd better make myself clear. Trespass on my land, and you'll be shot on sight."

"Clare Sanders gave me a message for you, Vance," the girl said. "He thought I might see you first, since this house is all you have left."

Coldness tightened Vance's nerves, but he made no move, watching her, stirred strangely, and yet repelled because she was with Cutler.

"Let's have it," he demanded.

The girl's smile deepened, without warmth, and with an expectancy in it that puzzled him.

"He said to keep away from Catherine—or carry a gun."

"Just like that," Fred Vance said coldly.

"Just like that."

He stared blindly, not seeing the couple. Clare had been his friend once, and now this had come about. Years changed men, him most of all, and still he could not truly understand.

"Was that all?" he asked finally.

"Isn't that enough?" Cutler broke in. "Hell, Vance, get out while the getting's good—and don't come back."

"I'll stick for a time," Vance said dully, slow resolution growing.

Cutler shrugged. "It's your funeral," he said harshly. "You've had your warning."

"Shut up and get out," Vance said, and now passion was riding from its grave, burn-

ing in his mind.

"All right, Pat," Dave Cutler said. "Let's get back to the house."

"There's a barn dance tomorrow night, Vance," the girl said, and her tone was deliberately mocking. "Catherine will be there—and Clare, and others." He saw now that her eyes were so blue they were almost black. "I'll be sure to save a dance for you."

Cutler stirred. "Stay away, Vance."

Fred Vance ignored the man. He was watching the girl, baffled by the mockery of her voice, caught by something in her he could not define.

"I may drop in," he said.

"That's a promise," the girl said, and then she was gone.

Dave Cutler paused only for a few words. "I thought you were smart, Vance," he said. "You're fair game now!"

He went out, slamming the door; and after a moment there came the soft drumming of hoofs on the ground.

Fred Vance sat for a long moment at the table, fingers absently rolling a cigarette. Then he came from the chair and unrolled his bed pack on a side bunk. He blew out the lamp and lay on the bunk.

He tried to plan a course of action. He would see Catherine, then find a buyer for this bit of land. Then he would go away, alone, for now he had nothing at all to offer her.

He brought her vision to his mind, but another face kept interposing, a dark face-nose almost tip-tilted, mocking laughter deep in the eyes.

He swore violently and flicked his cigarette to the dirt floor. He didn't give a damn about the dark girl. She belonged to Cutler, she was part of the newness which had come to the land, and ugliness and violence had stripped everything away from him.

And yet he wondered what it would be like to take her in his arms.

Shame struck him that he could have such thoughts. Catherine was here, waiting, her promise held true throughout all the lonely months. He owed her more than he could ever repay.

He smiled grimly into the darkness, hearing the dying crackle of the fire. He had been warned, but tomorrow night he would attend the barn dance. There was a compulsion driving him which would never be satisfied until he stood once again upon the ranch which had been his.

II

FOR hours now, the horses and buckboards and buggies had been arriving at the ranch. Children shouted happily and tirelessly, and men and women moved about open pits in which huge beds of red coals roasted beef and pork. A dance was a celebration, and the celebrants came early and stayed late.

Fred Vance watched the activity from the shelter of his house. His horse nickered from where it was ground-hitched. It had been saddled for an hour now, but he had made no move to rise and climb into the saddle. He heard the music, and his toe tapped the rhythm of the melody. The dancing had started.

He swore suddenly and came to his feet, and his shadow raced away and up the adobe wall and mocked his every move. He ground his cigarette beneath the heel of his boot, then strode toward the horse. It blew gustily at his weight, then swung from the rack. Vance rode slowly, wondering how many knew he was in the country again, and his belly muscles tightened against his belt in anticipation of what might lay ahead.

He reined the black through a fence gate onto the Box T. Here the road was worn, grass ceasing at the edge of brown dirt. Music was brighter and louder, and he could hear the muffled excitement of the dancers. A shiver touched him, and he reined in, wondering.

A few men went past, walking, but they gave no heed to him. Light spilled from the house windows, and nostalgia bit at Vance's heart. His lips stiffened, but he held a half-smile. He swung the horse into a hitching rack and slid from saddle, looping the reins carelessly over the pole.

A fiddle carried the lead in *Suzie Belle* and an accordion ran ripples of notes into

Catherine cried out and bent over her brother

the melody. A guitar fitted harmonics, and a jug boomed the bass with monotonous regularity. The pound of feet upon the floor was a rushing thing, and laughter spilled from the wide doors, making the lantern-light even brighter.

He squared his shoulders and stepped into the light. Two men brushed by, and the smell of liquor was on them. He grinned, despite himself. They were heading for the well which was the traditional hiding place for the jug.

He saw the people. Fully a hundred were in the barn, children sitting in the mows, dangling bare feet. Dancers paraded and spun and pirouetted to the music, and the orchestra worked manfully at its trade, handkerchiefs tucked into limp collars, faces flushed with effort.

The punch table was at the far end, a great gleaming bowl filled with ruby-red liquid. Cakes and sandwiches and cookies and cups flanked the bowl, and two women worked busily, serving.

Fred Vance waited, not really knowing what to do. He saw Trig Fraker on one side. Trig had ridden with the Vances in the range fight three years before. But the man wasn't quite as Vance remembered. His hair was fully white and he was old.

Then Tump Keever saw him at the door, and his bow missed a note on the fiddle. Eyes turned curiously to follow his gaze, the music failed, instrument by instrument, and silence washed over the crowd, stilling laughter and voices and bringing a tension that was almost tangible.

"Vance!" the whispers went about. "Fred Vance . . . used to own this land . . . in prison . . . no guns . . . trouble . . . what does he want?"

He waited for the break. It had to come, one way or the other, and he waited out the moment, hands clenched unconsciously at his sides.

He saw Cutler, just coming through the door at the rear of the barn. The dark-haired girl was with him, and they were laughing. Then their laughter stilled, quenched by the silence.

Cutler noticed Vance first, and sudden anger mottled his face. He took a half-step forward. Then Pat's hand held him, and he stood listening to her soft whisper. After a moment, he swung to the musicians, his voice lifting.

"Get along with the dance!" he cried.

FRED VANCE sighed. The break had come his way. Caution still tightened his nerves, but he walked steadily toward Cutler, and when he was before the girl and man, he bowed formally.

"I took advantage of your invitation," he said steadily.

"You're crowding your luck," Cutler said grimly.

Vance forced a smile, conscious that a hundred people watched, but now he was wondering why he had come. He started to speak, then Pat was moving into the circle of his arms.

"I believe this is our dance," she said, her eyes strangely excited.

"Pat!" Cutler snapped.

Fred Vance swung her onto the floor, and they moved away in graceful rhythm. And somehow this was a victory over Cutler, a thing to be relished.

"I wondered if you would come," the slender girl whispered, and now there was laughter in her voice.

The music was a waltz, and the melody came through, the rhythm infectious and compelling. Fred Vance concentrated upon the steps, for it had been long since he had danced. Despite himself, his heart beat faster, for she was as he had thought she would be, lithe and slender and thistle-light in his arms.

"You don't remember me, do you?" Pat asked.

"Remember?"

She laughed aloud, and the sound drew a smile to his mouth. Her eyes were lighter than he'd thought, and she wore perfume which crept insidiously into his consciousness.

"You wouldn't," she said. "I was in pigtails and watched you from the mow. It was a dance like this one."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't remember."

Her smile did not waver. "I thought not,"

she said. "But I remembered."

"Who are you?" he asked. "When did you marry Cutler?"

"Marry—" Her laughter tinkled against his cheek. "I'm not married to him or anyone else. He's my stepfather." Her tone went almost dead. "Mother died last year when a horse threw her. Our last name is, or was, Severn, and we lived at Railsend."

He remembered now, vaguely. Mrs. Severn had been a widow, a dark, stately woman from back East, and strangely out of place in this raw land. He tried to retain his memory-picture, but it faded away, and she sensed it and found no affront.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

He whirled her to the music, all talk gone for the moment. Laughter swelled about them, and lanterns swayed from vibrations. Crepe streamers fluttered, red and blue and orange, in the stir of breeze.

"I hope—" Pat began.

He stiffened, and her speech drained away, as she followed the line of his gaze. He missed a step and caught his balance again, and the girl in his arms was forgotten for the moment.

Catherine Sanders was in the doorway now, golden hair almost shoulder length. She smiled and talked to the two men at her side. She was taller than he remembered, but youth still lay in her body, and the crimson dress accented the soft curved lines and made her utterly feminine.

"Katie!" he whispered.

He knew then how empty his life had been and what had drawn him back to this country.

His gaze narrowed at sight of the men with Catherine. Her brother Clare was there, as blond as she, but big and solid, his face hard and sullen. The other was a shorter man, and he had once ridden for Cutler. He was dark and laughing, and his teeth flashed whitely as he talked. Vance remembered him now—Matt Jennings.

Fred Vance missed a step, and Pat helped him regain the rhythm. He muttered an apology, not really caring. The hum of whispering had broadened now, and it washed over him and the blonde at the door. Her smile was a bit puzzled, as she tried to reason out the several covert signals friends were giving.

THE music ceased, and Fred Vance bowed formally to Pat and muttered an excuse. She turned away, and now there was no animation in her eyes, only the blankness which came from deeply hidden thoughts.

Catherine saw him coming, and surprise stopped all life in her face. A slender hand lifted to her throat. The crimson dress hugged her body, and her breasts lifted at the quick surge of her breathing.

"Hello, Catherine," Vance said gently.

"Fred!" she whispered.

He ignored the men, not seeing them. This was an awkward moment, not as he had thought it would be. A hundred people stared, and whispers ran from mouth to mouth.

Suddenly his throat was tight with emotion. "It's been long," he said.

He saw the slow gladness welling in her eyes. Her hand reached out and touched his, and suddenly they smiled.

"Too long," she answered.

Clare moved in then, his face hard and steady, a pulse beating visibly at his temple.

"We don't want anything to do with you, Vance," he snapped harshly. "Stay away from us."

Then Catherine touched his arm, and he went still, anger resting in his face. Matt Jennings watched from dark eyes, trying to fathom the feelings, then shrugged and relaxed. The moment was over.

"Come outside," Fred Vance urged the girl. "We can talk there."

She hesitated, her gaze flicking to the crowd. Then she turned quietly and went before him, and he followed, shoulders squared, conscious of those who watched.

Catherine waited for him beside the nearest buggy, and when he was close, she came into his arms. He held her tightly, feeling the dull pounding of his heart.

"Katie, Katie!" he whispered.

He found her lips, and they were cool and soft and willing against his mouth. His eyes were closed, as though to shut away everything in the past. This was compensation, full payment for all that had happened, and

in him was the wish that it would always be this way.

Then she came free of his arms, instinctively smoothing her hair. "I had almost forgotten it was like that," she said.

"Not I," he said. "I've thought of it a thousand times."

She leaned against the buggy, slim and desirable in the moonlight. "And now you're back," she said.

"For a time." The trembling in him was stilling, and he breathed easier.

Music whirled from the barn, and a few men stood in the doorway staring, but not seeing, for racked horses were in between. A light breeze had come and it was cool and dry.

He caught her and drew her close again. "Come with me, Katie," he whispered. "I know of land to the north—"

She drew away, and stiffness had grown in her body. "But this is my home, my land." Bitterness crept into her voice. "I expect to—"

Shadows crossed them, and when Vance turned, Clare was there with Jennings. Instinctively Vance backed, sensing their intent.

"Get to the dance, Katie," Clare said. "I want to talk to Vance."

"Don't be stupid, Clare," Catherine said, fear in her voice.

"Get to the dance," Clare repeated stolidly.

"No!"

She defied her brother, and Fred Vance felt a thrill of pride. But he knew, too, what was coming, and he did not want her to share it. This was trouble, waiting, festering, and in a moment it would burst.

"Go in, Catherine," he said woodenly. "We want to talk."

She went, but reluctantly, and when she was in the barn, Vance grinned thinly at the men.

"Now what?" he asked.

"This," Jennings said, and threw his blow.

IT WAS fast and unexpected, for Clare was the leader. Vance tried to roll his head, but the fist caught him in the side of his face, and flame blossomed in his mind. He felt the buggy wheel at his back; and then he was whirling aside, going to hands and knees on the ground.

Clare kicked, and his boot blasted agony into Vance's chest. He moaned, then fought his way upright. He went in, trying for Jennings, knowing he stood no chance against both. Somehow, his rage was at the dark man, for Clare had once been his friend and there was a bit of justice in his actions.

He caught Jennings, smashing with both hands, seeing blood flow instantly from the man's mashed mouth. He felt heady exultation, as he battered at the other; and he drove him back, throwing every bit of weight into each blow.

He sensed Clare coming in, and whirled aside. A fist burst a bomb in his throat, and he gasped for breath, suddenly sick. Jennings snorted, brushing blood from his mouth, and then stalked him. Vance backed.

They caught him at the hitchrack, and both rushed. He slashed at Clare's face, turning his side against Jennings. Red agony pulsed in him at the vicious blows battering his chest and head. Darkness swam in his eyes.

Faintly, he heard the cries of men at the barn, and knew they were running toward the fight.

III

CLARE bulled in, taking Vance's blows. Now he was the stronger, beating down Vance's defenses, his fists like sledges which never stopped. Jennings was grunting with every blow he struck, leaning into each.

Vance could not break the wall ahead, and his back was at the hitch-rack. He felt the blows but dimly now. As he sagged, Jennings straightened him with an uppercut. Clare lashed with his boot again, and Vance bent in sick agony. Jennings rabbit-punched him viciously as he went down.

He crumpled slowly, dimly conscious of the dirt. His hands pawed for support and found none. Clare kicked him twice, once in the side and then in the head. A rocket burst somewhere, and its silver sparks clouded Vance's mind. He sighed, not feeling the last blows. He went slack on the ground, blood seeping from his nose, oblivious of the world and the moonlit night.

Over him, Jennings grinned bleakly at Clare, and triumph lay in them. They stood aside to permit the men and women to see what they had done. Catherine was there, white-faced but silent. Dave Cutler stood close, the faintest of smiles on his bitter mouth.

"Maybe now he'll know he ain't wanted," Jennings said gaspingly.

Pat was watching, saying nothing. Her gaze lifted from the battered man on the ground to Catherine, and then to her stepfather. There was no hidden laughter in her eyes now. They were hooded and enigmatic, filled with thoughts which tightened the curve of her lips.

Trig Fraker moved heavily forward, squatting and turning Fred Vance. His tone was even and unhurried.

"Get my rig, somebody," he ordered quietly. "I'll see that he gets back to where he's living."

"It's in the herder adobe near Sweet Spring," Pat volunteered.

Then the crowd was breaking up, swinging back to the barn and the dance. Voices rose, and the memories were spoken. The fight meant little to most of them, for they had arrived after the range war. Only a few really remembered, and they spoke softly. Guns had always been the answer to something like this, and those who remembered searched their hearts and wondered where they would stand should such a war come again.

With Trig Fraker's rig disappearing into the night, Vance's horse trailing behind, the fight was almost forgotten. Clare washed his hands and face at the trough and came in to the dance. He was almost unmarked, and now almost all of the sullenness was gone from his features.

Matt Jennings stayed outside the barn for a few minutes. He washed away the marks of the fight, tenderly wiping his bruised mouth. He drank whisky from a tin cup given him a few minutes before, then rolled a cigarette.

A hand reached past him and scratched a match. Pat was there, limned by the match light. She was smiling.

"I did it, Pat. I whipped Vance for you. Where's the money?"

"Fifty dollars, Matt," she said. "It was a good fight."

She was gone then, running lithely back to the barn. He juggled the gold coins for a moment before dropping them into his pocket. A shade of puzzlement was in his eyes. Then he shrugged. It was easy money, and if she wanted Fred Vance cut down to size—well, that was her business.

Grinning, he finished his drink and swaggered back to the dance. . . .

SUN heat pulsed through the open door of the adobe house, and there was no breath of air stirring. Fred Vance lay on his bunk and sweltered. The passing hours had taken the white pain out of his body, but he still ached when he moved, and a bruise was yellow and blue along the left side of his jaw.

The anger was gone now, but humiliation still rankled. He smoked and thought, and a sense of shame lay in him that so many must have seem him whipped the night before. Trip Fraker had stayed two hours into the early morning, before returning to the dance.

No one had appeared during the morning and afternoon, but as darkness fell he heard the sound of hooves in the yard. He wished he had a gun. Then relaxation came at sight of Trig's Fraker's broad face.

"Hello, Fred," Trig Fraker said cordially. "Feeling better?"

"I'll live," Vance agreed, and squinted into the sunshine at the door at the figure just behind Fraker's big body.

A thrill touched him and he came erect, going toward the doorway. Catherine was there, her hair wind-blown in a golden cloud about her face. She was smiling, hands outstretched. He caught them eagerly, drawing her into the house.

"I meant to see you earlier, but Trig and I were busy," Catherine explained. "Are you all right?"

Fred Vance grinned ruefully, touching the bruise on his cheek. "I'm all right," he admitted. "But Clare plays rough."

Irritation flushed the girl's cheeks, and for a second her prettiness was gone.

"He won't try anything like that again," she said. "I promise that."

Vance turned away, indicating the barrel chairs, while he leaned against the upper bunk. Absently, his fingers sought for tobacco and paper and he began rolling a cigarette.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I'm pulling out tonight, heading for new country."

"Pulling out?" Trig Fraker said in surprise. "But I thought—"

Fred Vance laughed in sudden harsh amusement. "You thought I was about to start the old feud going again. Well, I'm not. I haven't a thing to gain and, anyway, one man wouldn't have a chance against Cutler."

His gaze refused to meet Catherine's, and he could feel the flush heating his face.

"Quitting?" There was a faint tinge of contempt in Fraker's tone.

"Call it that, if you like," Vance shrugged. "But I've had a lot of time to think things over, and I see nothing to gain by staying." His head turned, and his smile was cynical. "Here's my spread,—a dirty adobe and a few acres of land. I haven't enough money to stock the place, much less keep it going."

Catherine's boot tapped the hard floor almost as though in impatience. Her face was still, without expression, but curiosity lay in her eyes.

"You're afraid?" she asked.

Fred Vance laughed aloud, and lit his cigarette. "No, I'm not afraid," he said. "I just don't see any percentage in my favor."

Trig Fraker fingered a worn pipe, knocking dottle into his palm. "What if we could give you that percentage?" he asked.

Vance blew a coiling ring of smoke. "How?" he asked. "Say you supplied a hundred gunslingers, I still wouldn't gain a thing. The courts are on Cutler's side."

"That's where you might be wrong," Catherine said.

"Wrong?" Fred Vance frowned.

"Listen, Fred," Trig Fraker said carefully, "we've got proof that Dave Cutler bought the men who ran those courts."

"What?" Vance stared in surprise.

"That's right," Fraker said. "When you were—away, those of us who'd also lost land got together and sent an investigator to Washington. We found a clerk who admitted he'd been paid to change some old records and place the land titles in doubt."

BRIGHT sparks showered as Vance broke his cigarette in his excitement. His head swung from the girl to the man, and a pulse began hammering in his throat.

"Where is this man?" he said. "Will he testify to that?"

Trig Fraker's face went grim. "He's dead," he admitted bleakly. "The law said it was suicide, but we think it was murder. But the point is that we know somebody had been sharpshooting back in Washington. We think more people will talk, if we really go to work."

Vance sighed in disappointment. The promise had been there for a brief moment, then had vanished like the smoke of his cigarette.

"How should you know this witness wasn't lying?" he asked.

"He knew too many details," Fraker explained.

Silence followed. A horse nickered outside. Vance could feel the tension building in him.

"So?" he said at last.

"So we need you, Fred," Catherine said. "You were the one most hurt by the trickery. Therefore, if you would head the investigation, our cause would be helped."

"What evidence do you have other than a dead man's word?"

Trig Fraker filled his pipe and scratched a match alight. "Not a thing," he admitted. "We've got a few leads, but they peter out. Cutler was smart. He kept records of the deals he made. Now the men he bought are afraid to talk."

"Records?" Vance caught at the single word.

Catherine answered, her face calm, but light burning now in her eyes. She was slim and feminine, and yet she seemed harder than Fraker.

"An account book, a small black book, in which Cutler recorded every bribe he made and every deal pulled. With that in our hands, we could pull the earth out from

under him."

"And where is the book?"

"We don't know," Catherine answered. "The one witness we found claimed to have seen it."

Vance dropped his cigarette, crushing it beneath his heel. "It's probably destroyed by now."

Trig Fraker blew smoke no whiter than his hair. "I doubt it," he said carefully. "Dave Cutler's no fool. He'll hang onto that record. It's the only hold he has to keep the men in it from turning against him. He's figuring to protect himself in Washington should anything ever go wrong."

Fred Vance sighed. "I wouldn't know where to start," he said. "Anyway, how do I know this is the truth?"

Catherine flushed. "Why should we lie?" she asked, almost in anger.

"Look," Fred Vance said, "I'm not trying to start an argument. "But I have a hunch quite a few of the people in the valley would like to see a war going again. Maybe they figure the situation might reverse itself." He chuckled grimly "I'm sort of like a fuse to a powder keg."

Fraker stood, and anger was deep in him, held in bondage by his will. He stared at Vance, and his eyes were mirrors, without expression.

"Then you won't help?" he asked. "You've got the most to gain, and you won't help!"

Fred Vance shifted uneasily. "I didn't say that," he countered.

"You don't have to," Fraker said grimly. "I thought I saw the change in you last night, and now it's plenty clear. You're quitting, and you've convinced yourself that what you plan to do is right."

Anger knotted Vance's hands, yet he made no move. A sickness lay in him, as though his mind had been laid open for all to see. He did not fully feel the truth of the accusations; but because there was a doubt in him, hot words spilled over.

"What the hell do you know of how I feel?" he said. "Did you ever spend three years in a cell? There's plenty of time for thinking, plenty of time to know fighting never solved a thing—at least not the type of gunfighting I might start here. To hell with it, and with you!"

HE MEANT to continue, meant to say the words bottled in him for so long. But he saw the whiteness of Catherine's face, and he knew he could not say more.

"All right, Fred," Trig Fraker said, and moved toward the door. "Coming, Catherine."

"In a moment," the girl said. "Wait for me."

Trig Fraker hesitated, as though he had more to say. Then he shrugged and went through the door. Fred Vance shivered, watching him leave. It was as though he had cut a last tie with his past, as though he had denied himself the comfort of a last friend.

Catherine came toward him, slim and erect in her riding costume. Her skirt was fringed with crimson, and her boots were polished a deep brown. She came to him, and he waited, wondering what her words would be, a tiny trembling in his hands.

"I waited a long time, Fred," she said gently. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He swallowed, then reached out and drew her close. He could smell the perfume of her hair, and her breasts were soft against his chest. Blood quickened, and when he spoke, he was surprised at the huskiness of his tone.

"It means everything," he said. "You know that. But try to see my point, too. I'm on parole. If I get mixed into any trouble, any trouble at all, I'll be arrested and sentenced to serve out the rest of the original term. I can't take the chance."

Catherine drew away, and again he felt the instant of strangeness, as though they had never met. "Not even for me?" she asked.

His face grew hard. "That isn't fair," he argued.

"Isn't fair!" Anger tightened her mouth. "What *is* fair? I lost my land and you lost your life—and all because crooked men decided it had to be that way." Her hands shook his shoulders. "Oh, Fred, how can you be so blind!"

Stubbornness lay in him, and resentment,

and because he was disturbed, he was unusually brusque.

"All right, I'm blind, maybe yellow," he snapped. "But that isn't important." He drew a deep breath. "Forget this, Katie. Leave with me tonight."

"And give up everything!"

"Everything!" He laughed. "A two-bit spread and a lot of trouble!"

She came free of his arms, stepping back. Her eyes were cool, her smooth features absolutely without expression.

"No," she said. "I'm staying, and I want you to stay, too. I want a home and security and—" Her voice trailed away.

She watched silently for a moment, then whirled toward the door. His voice reached out and tried to hold her.

"Katie," he cried. "Wait!"

"I'll wait, Fred," she said at the doorway. "I'll wait at Trig's ranch for your answer." Her voice was hard, almost like a man's. "There's a meeting of the ranchers tonight, and you can tell all of us what your decision is."

She was gone before he could answer. And by the time he reached the door, she and Trig Fraker were riding away, cutting over the ridge toward Fraker's Lazy Bar. He watched them go, leaning against the door jamb, and bitterness welled in him.

IV

IF he wanted Catherine, Vance knew now, he'd have to buy her at her stated price. She knew he must risk his freedom, but she did not think the sacrifice too great.

He heard the soft footsteps at the corner of the cabin, and strangely he felt no shock of surprise when Pat came around the house. A faint smile was on her lips, and her eyes watched him enigmatically. Dark hair flowed about her shoulders, and her white stetson hung by its cord across her shoulders. Beaded moccasins pouted breaths of dust into the air, and her slitted riding skirt hugged her pliant curves.

"Very interesting conversation," she said calmly.

Fred Vance flushed. "You were listening!" he said accusingly.

Pat nodded, without shame. "I was," she admitted, and another faint smile curved her lips. "You would be surprised at what an eavesdropper hears, and I assure you I've had quite a bit of practice in the last year."

Panic touched him. "And now you'll tell Cutler!"

The girl shrugged, waiting at his side. "What I might do doesn't matter. What you decide to do is the important thing."

He frowned, trying to read the meaning in her words. "You mean, if I run out, you won't tell Cutler. But if I join Catherine and the others, you'll talk?"

Pat did not answer, and her silence was infuriating. He straightened, anger growing.

"Get out," he said rudely, "and keep quiet."

She did not move. "Then you won't fight?" she asked.

"Leave me alone." He turned away, and she caught his arm and spun him back with surprising strength.

"All right," she said, "I'm going." She smiled wryly. "I waited months for you to return. I wanted to see if you were as I remembered. I wanted to see what you would do when you heard Dave Cutler had won your land through trickery. Well, I found out. You're yellow. Go ahead and run."

Her accusation shocked and startled him. He blinked, fighting for words. And then Pat slapped him squarely in the mouth.

His head rocked. Automatically his hand came up in retaliation. Then he stopped the blow, but his fingers caught her shoulder and whirled her in against him.

"You little devil!" he whispered.

He did it in anger, wanting to hurt and humiliate her. He drew her close, pinning her struggling body against his with superior strength, then sought and found her mouth and kissed her with savage deliberation.

She fought, and her soft-shod feet kicked at his leg. He kissed her and stopped the kiss, and saw the tears of rage and frustration in her eyes. Then he kissed her again, deliberately, searchingly.

And suddenly she did not fight, and the anger left his lips, and hers were warm and

soft and exciting. He kissed her, and she was pliant and willing and shocking in her nearness.

Then she was free, and he was staring blindly, a pulse pounding at his temple. He had meant to hurt her, and there was no hurt, only an awareness, a brightness such as he had never known.

"Pat—" he whispered.

"Weren't you brave!" she said. Then she turned and ran, and he could hear her crying.

"Pat!" he cried aloud, but she gave no heed.

His outstretched hand dropped to his side, and he watched her figure dwindle into smallness down the trail to the Box T.

Fred Vance stood in the late sunlight, and his thoughts whirled and churned endlessly in a wild maelstrom which was his mind. He was confused and ashamed, and he felt guilt at his betrayal of Catherine. And yet he could not forget the pulse-pounding excitement which Pat's kiss had brought to him. He knew he was a traitor to himself and to Catherine, and unconsciously he scrubbed at his lips with the back of his hand.

"Hell!" he said in deep disgust, then turned and entered the adobe house.

A quarter-mile away, Pat rested for a moment. She was flushed, and anger sparkled in her eyes.

"Damn you, Fred Vance!" she whispered over and over. "Oh, damn you!"

She cried then, softly and deeply, while leaning against the fence post. She cried, and only a soft-eyed rabbit was there to watch. . . .

THE moon was completely full now, and shadows were black canyons in the silvered landscape. Saddle leather creaked rhythmically beneath Fred Vance's weight, and the horse went sleepily ahead, urged by the twitched reins.

Vance rode tiredly, for the passing hours had been strange. His decision had come finally, and it was not what he had wanted. But he rode now toward Trig Fraker's ranch, to join with him and the others. He did not know if the fight he was entering was a futile one, but to lose Catherine, along with everything else, was more than he could bear.

In him, too, was the knowledge that by now Dave Cutler knew of the plan. Pat would have talked, and Cutler would be making preparations of his own for a battle of roaring guns and dying men.

He rolled a cigarette and hung it, unlit, in his lips. He swung the black to follow the river bank, hearing the grating of steel shoes on white sand. A fish broke water, lunging at a night-flying insect, and ripples spread and vanished in the moonlight.

Vance sighed. This was good land, a land of promise and hope and fullfillment. People lived here, their roots sunk deep into the earth, and some day this land would be marked with cities and wide roads. The old land barons were gone, never to return.

Cattle moved along the far bank, settling for the night. Dripping muzzles lifted, and mild eyes watched him pass. A calf blatted for its mother, and a bull pawed the earth in habitual belligerence. Then he was by, riding alone, and the first marker of the Lazy Bar rose in warning to tresspassers.

He fumbled a match from his shirt, reaching to scratch it alight on the horn. Then he stiffened, held rigid with shock and suspense.

The echoes danced, muffled by the narrow strip of trees along the river. They danced, and he knew a gun had been fired. Then two other shots came, vicious and flat-sounding, and after that there was silence.

The black moved nervously, ears flattening. Vance reined in, waiting, searching with his hearing, his eyes intent. He saw nothing, and there was no sound.

The black went ahead, urged by the pressure of knees. Vance wished again he wore a gun. The shots might mean death, or be a signal, or an accident. With a gun he could investigate.

He rounded a clump of cottonwoods and saw a horse standing at the water's edge. It was ground-hitched, and it backed a bit, then stood. Nearby, a man shadow tried to crawl, but collapsed.

Vance rode ahead, head swiveling, but saw nothing. Trees came almost to the

water, and the shadows could have hidden a hundred men. The man on the ground tried to come erect again, then collapsed, sprawling.

Fred Vance came from his horse, darting forward. Squatting, he turned the man, cradling his head and shoulders with his knee and arms.

"What happened?" he asked.

He saw the man's face now, and shock ran deep into his mind. Blood was on Matt Jennings' chin and mouth, black in the moonlight.

When he struggeld for air, a bubble swelled and broke.

"Don't—" he whispered.

"Jennings!" Fred Vance cried softly. "For God's sake, Jennings!"

He saw the wounds, all three high in the man's chest. Jennings had clawed at his shirt, tearing it partially away, and now the blood ran and pooled over his chest and stomach and fled along his leg. He was breathing in great sucking gasps, and his eyes rolled wildly in pain and shock.

"Who did it?" Vance asked, and felt helplessness touch him.

"I'm afraid," Jennings said then, and the words had the gray of death in them. "This is much too big for me. I'm pulling out!"

He rocked in agony, and Vance fought to hold him still. Only seconds were left now before eternity.

"You're next, Fraker," Jennings said then. "I'll gutshoot you too—"

"Easy, easy!" Vance whispered.

JENNINGS heard his voice, and a bit of sanity came to his eyes. They focused and stared at him. Shock now had stifled the pain.

"Vance!" he said almost clearly. "What are you doing here?"

"What happened?" Vance asked sharply.

But the veil was sliding over Jennings' face again. His mouth worked, and a blood-bubble broke, and his neck grew taut and hard.

"I did it, Pat," he said. "I whipped Vance for you. Where's the money?" His voice broke into a sigh, and for a moment he was still. Then he went on, "I'll kill Fraker for you. I'll start the war again. I'll do it for you because I'm in love with—"

His words faded, and slowly Vance let the body slump sideward to the ground. He stared blindly at the murdered man, stared; and a sickness crept into his heart. This was the start. Now a man lay dead, and this was the new beginning of a range war which ended three years before.

He stood listening, but there was still no sound. The killer was gone, riding over soft earth which would muffle hoofbeats.

Automatically, his gaze went over the ground. He saw cigarette stubs, and boot-prints in the sand, small boot prints. Another horse had been ground-hitched beside Jennings'.

Panic struck then. A man lay dead and he, Fred Vance, stood over the body. Jennings had been murdered, and all the valley knew there was bad blood between Jennings and himself. He was on parole, and this would send him back to prison, for none would believe his story.

He whirled, startled by a sound. But it was only a cow at the water's edge. His nerves were tight with strain. He knew he must get away before discovery here. Now there was no choice—he must leave the country.

He spun toward his horse, climbing into saddle and lifting the reins. Catherine didn't matter now, nothing mattered now but to ride away and find safety in some far part of the country.

And then, even as panic guided him, a thought intruded, a memory of the dying man's words. Jennings had planned to kill Fraker. Now that Jennings was dead, someone else would do the job. Trig Fraker was marked for bushwhacking lead.

Fred Vance scowled, impatience striking. He owed Fraker nothing. They had been friends, but only this afternoon the man had denied him. To hell with him! Let him fight his own battles!

He thought of Cutler then, big and vicious, hard and cunning. Pat intruded in his mind, and a cold anger surged in him. She was with Cutler, helping him, hanging on to what would come to her some day. His face grew stiff. She had even hired Jennings to

whip him in the fight at the dance.

He shivered, wondering what Catherine would think now. She had stood by him for three years, had written him and waited for his release. She would be hurt and disappointed.

And he remembered those months living in a cell like a caged animal. Blind terror broke in him at the thought of being returned to those grim walls.

He remembered Trig Fraker then, memories rolling from the past. He recalled the laughter and the friendliness and fatherly advice. He remembered how the man had ridden with the Vances, risking his life.

He remembered those and a hundred other details, and suddenly his decision was made. He chuckled grimly at the impulse which motivated him, but the answer was there, and so he followed it.

He turned the black, riding through the strip of trees and onto the wheat land. He spurred ahead, and the horse began to run, muscles bunching and swelling and driving the black ahead.

V

WIND whipped against Fred Vance's face, but now the panic was gone, and he was thinking clearly. He would warn Fraker, telling him what Jennings had said. He would tell his story, then begin his run along the twilight trail. In a time like this, perhaps Catherine might even ride with him. But whether or no, he would warn Fraker and give the man a chance to watch his back-trail.

He followed the edge of the fields, riding lithely, almost giving the great black its head. Minutes passed, and he blew the horse once, then sent it ahead again. Light came out of the darkness. Square windows filled with a yellow glow. A windmill lifted its skeleton against the sky, and the vanes turned slowly in the idle breeze.

He cut around the barn, dust flying from his horse's hooves, and a prowling cat spat and arched its back and streaked for the safety of a tree. A dog began to bark, the front door of the house came open, and a woman stood in the light.

"Who's there?" she called.

"It's me—Fred Vance," he cried out. "Where's Trig?"

"What's wrong?" There was the tinge of panic in the woman's frightened voice.

"Nothing," Vance lied. "Where's Trig?"

"Gone!" The woman's voice went unnaturally flat. "He and the others have ridden over to the Box T to talk to Cutler."

"How long ago?" Vance could feel the horse sweat soaking through his breeches.

"At least fifteen minutes."

He swung the horse, and it was running hard and swift at the edge of the yard. He swore brutally, tension building in swift momentum.

Fifteen minutes! He might be too late, for he knew the mounting temper of the valley men. And Cutler would be prepared, forewarned by Pat. He had to reach Trig Fraker and warn him. He had to tell of Jennings' death and Jennings' words.

He rode, and the minutes dragged by. He took the short cuts, riding hard; but even so he knew he would be late. The Box T edged the Lazy Bar, but the ranch houses were several miles apart.

The black missed a jump and fell, and he went hurtling over its head. He lay stunned for seconds, groping feebly to come erect. The horse rose shaking its head, then waited, held by the grounded reins.

Vance stumbled to his feet, coughing breath into his lungs again, and lurched to the black. It shied, but he caught it and mounted again. They went ahead, more slowly now.

He saw the lights of the Box T. Blood had run from his nose, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. He blinked, to clear the darkness of the fall from his eyes, and slowly the lights ceased their swinging and came to rest.

He cut to the left and followed the wagon road. Ahead, shadows milled before the lights, and he saw that they were horses. A lantern was at the door, held in someone's hand, and men were clotted before it.

Men spun about, watching, as he pulled the black to a halt. He slid from saddle and ran toward the door. Faces were blurs that grew features, and he recognized many.

"It's Vance!" somebody called, and a path opened and he was at the porch, breathing hard.

Trig Fraker watched, his face cold and stony. "So you decided to come along," he said, almost tonelessly.

"I'm here," Vance said flatly.

His eyes went about the small group on the porch, and he could feel the tightness of emotion. Dave Cutler faced him, and the man wore guns now, belted low on his thighs. They seem incongruous, but remembering a time three years before, Vance knew the man could use them with an uncanny speed and accuracy.

Cutler was silent, his eyes narrowed and hard. There was no fear in him, only a deadly watchfulness.

"So you're in this, too," he said.

"More than you think," Vance answered.

HE SAW Pat then. She stood in the shadows at the end of the porch, but the lanternlight sought her out, cupping her slim body. She was dressed as she had been in the afternoon, but now her body was rigid with strain.

"Get on with it!" a man yelled from the crowd, and Trig Fraker nodded as though in answer.

"Here's our proposition, Cutler," he said, "and if you're smart you'll take it." He drew a deep breath. "We have proof that you bribed men in Washington to back your claim for this land."

"You're crazy!" Cutler burst out.

"And so rather than spend a lot of money in the courts, we'll make a deal with you. You keep the section on which the Box T lies and sign over the rest to us, and we'll let you stay."

Dave Cutler laughed then, despite the flush of anger in his face. He laughed, and his contempt was great for the men he faced.

"Get out," he said. "I don't have to deal with you on any basis."

Fred Vance tensed, wondering what would happen. Cutler stood no chance against the mob in the yard, and yet he faced Fraker as though he were a man alone.

"You want a fight, then?" Fraker asked.

Fred Vance shifted, feeling a warm hand slide into the crook of his arm. Catherine was there, her boots making little sound on the porch, her smile an intimate thing which drew them together and away from the others.

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

A man pushed from the crowd, coming up the steps. He was big and blocky, and anger rode his square features. He was totally unlike the Clare Sanders whom Vance had known before. Gone was the boyishness, and now in him lay the sullen bitterness of a man who brooded too much. He ranged himself at Fraker's side, and his hand was close to the gun at his hip.

"I've heard enough talk," he said harshly. "This is our last word. Save the Box T or lose everything. It's your choice."

The laughter stilled in Dave Cutler. He was a big man, supremely certain of himself, and now he faced Fraker and Clare, and he measured them, estimating and evaluating.

"I don't like threats," he said.

"Who cares what you like!" Clare snapped.

"I do," Cutler said clearly, and turned slowly to survey the crowd. "Now I'm giving a warning. Any man who pulls a gun here, or who gives any trouble, will answer to the sheriff." He smiled slowly. "If you've got evidence, give it to the law. Otherwise leave me alone before I break all of you."

"Why, damn you—" Clare snarled and went for his gun.

Cutler moved. His hand flashed, and the gun came from his holster. A man cried out, but Cutler's move could not be stopped. He swung with a vicious, fluid strength. Then Clare was down, pistol-whipped.

Catherine cried out and bent over her brother. He was already stirring, a bloody streak along his temple where the gun had struck. Dave Cutler took a backward step.

"Next time," he said, "I shoot."

Trig Fraker was motionless for a second, then his hand went stealing toward his gun.

"No!" Pat Severn said from the shadows, and miraculously there was a revolver in her slim fingers.

"Stay out of this, Pat," Dave Cutler said harshly.

Fred Vance moved then, going forward two full steps. His mouth was hard, and a strange sickness was in him.

"Why should she?" he asked brutally. "She just shot Matt Jennings to death. Why should she hesitate at killing Fraker—since you've planned his death all along?"

THE words were clear and hard, but a moment passed before the meaning was clearly understood. Then men gasped and pressed closer. Blankness came to Trig Fraker's face. He swung about, staring at Vance.

"Jennings dead!" he said, almost whispering.

"Yeah!" Fred Vance still watched Pat, and now the sickness was growing until it was almost a physical pain. "I found him wounded. He died while I—"

"A likely story," Cutler sneered. "If Jennings is dead, then you probably did it. The whole valley knows he whipped you last night, and you're not the kind to forget."

"Fred, you didn't!" Catherine whispered from where she knelt beside her dazed brother.

Fred Vance licked his lips. This was what he had expected, and yet he must make his story hold.

"I heard the shots," he said, "and ran them down. I found Jennings dying, but the killer got away."

"Sure!" Cutler sneered again. "The killer got away." He swung to the silent crowd. "What do you think happened?" he cried. "Jennings whips Vance, and then is killed, while Vance just happens to stumble on the killing. How many believe that?"

A muttering grew, the first lapping waves heralding a growing storm. Clare struggled to his feet, shaking his head.

"I warned Jennings," he said loudly. "I told him Vance would drygulch him!"

Fred Vance turned his head, staring about. The fear was gone now, and anger was burning slowly to white heat.

"Who hired Jennings to start the fight with me?" he asked. "Answer that, Pat. How much did you pay him?" [Turn page]

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He could see the whiteness of her face, and despite the terror of the moment, a pang of pity stirred in him.

"I never—" she began.

"Don't lie!" Vance snapped brutally. "Jennings told me he was hired by you."

"So what?" Clare said. "I was in on it, too, and I wasn't paid. I owed you something for three years, and I got some revenge."

"Clare!" Catherine said. Her voice lifted in appeal. "You people know that Fred is not a murderer. If he says he found Matt dying on the river bank and that the murderer got away, then you must believe him."

"I wouldn't take his word for anything!" Dave Cutler said. "He's crazy from being in prison. He figured on coming back and starting the old trouble again."

"I'm not lying," Vance snapped. "I know what Jennings said. He told me with his dying breath that Pat hired him to start a fight with me. And he told me, too, that he was supposed to kill Trig Fraker!"

"Me!" Fraker said in surprise.

"Yes you," Vance said savagely. "That's the only reason I rode over here. Do you think I'm so stupid I wouldn't know I'd be accused of the killing? Hell, I rode over to warn you that Cutler and Pat are working together, and that you were slated for a bushwhacking."

"You're crazy!" Cutler roared.

"Maybe not!" Fred Vance was rigid, his hatred in full flame now. "If Fraker died, then opposition to you would be curbed. He's the leader, and with him gone, nobody would dare go against you."

"You're wrong," Clare said then. "If Fraker was killed, I'd start a war that would blow this valley apart. You seem to forget your dad and mine were partners. I've got as much at stake here as you. When Cutler robbed us, I lost as much as you."

VANCE whirled. "Maybe that was why you didn't want me back. Maybe you figured I'd just ride away from this country. Then if you could prove Cutler's dishonesty, everything would come to you."

"Maybe I did figure that way," Clare snapped.

"Clare—Fred!" Catherine begged. "Don't fight!"

"Don't fight!" Fred Vance laughed harshly. "I owe Clare something, too. How about our letters he intercepted while I was in prison?"

"Please, Fred, we'll talk about that later," Catherine said.

"What letters?" Clare asked.

"You know damned well what letters," Vance said hotly. "The ones I wrote to Catherine, and the ones she wrote to me."

"I never saw any letters." Clare's tone was puzzled.

"But—" Vance began.

"He's dazed," Catherine said, and placed her arm about the shoulders of her brother. "Anyway, that has nothing to do with this."

Dave Cutler broke in. "I agree. What is important right now is why Vance killed Jennings."

"I didn't kill Jennings," Vance argued angrily.

V

FRED VANCE could hear the growing mutter of the crowd now, and he backed a step. All watched him, and he felt a crowding. None here, but Catherine, was his friend.

"Then who did?" Trig Fraker asked.

Fred Vance swallowed. "Pat," he said. "And she won't be able to deny it. Her boot prints are around Jennings' body."

They stared at the girl, and her gaze did not waver.

She still held the gun in her hand, but now it was forgotten.

"Do you believe that, Fred?" she asked.

He winced, for despite the evidence, he wanted to believe in her innocence. She had tricked him and hired Jennings to fight him. Yet he had kissed her and thrilled to her, and he wanted that memory to remain, not this.

"What he believes doesn't matter," Trig Fraker said flatly.

Dave Cutler said, "To hell with all this talk! Pat was here all evening. Anyway, you've got my answer to your proposition. Take Vance and get out."

"Fred, do you believe it?" Pat said, and her voice was very calm.

Fred Vance looked straight into her eyes. "No," he said slowly, "I don't believe it."

"Fred!" Catherine said in shock.

"Then who killed him?" Fraker asked, and a mutter of voices echoed in question.

"I don't know!" Fred Vance shook his head.

"But you—" Fraker began, then asked, "Where did it happen?"

"On the river bank!" a man shouted. "He told us that."

It was then that Pat's voice came, soft and insistent, and the import of her words struck with a physical force.

"No," she said. "*Fred* didn't tell you."

Vance's head came up, and shock was suddenly in his mind. He remembered now, and blank horror came to his face.

"Catherine!" he whispered. "Catherine said—the river bank."

She was not statuesque now. She was frightened, and despite the bravery she tried to show, her expression gave her away.

"No!" she cried. "It's a trick!"

But Fred was shaking his head. "He said he was in love—it could have been with you. And the prints where he and the killer talked were made by boots—too small for a man. And you wear boots, too. And—" His voice broke.

"It's crazy!" Catherine cried. "Why should—"

"Why?" Pat's voice was strangely calm. "Maybe because you had gone too far. If Jennings was to kill Trig Fraker, then you asked too much. Jennings was a bully, but not a murderer. Maybe you knew he was ready to talk."

"Trig's my friend!" Catherine cried, and her slim hands spread in mute appeal.

"You have no friends when it comes to what you want," Pat said coldly. "You might fool men, but not a woman. You want this valley and you'll buy it with anything—men's lives, your honor, even Fred's love." Her hand slipped into her shirt blouse and drew out a limp black notebook. "This is what you fought to get, wasn't it?"

[*Turn page*]

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Dave Cutler gasped. "Where'd you get that?" he barked.

Pat smiled, without humor. "From where Catherine hid it," she said. "I could never find it, but Matt Jennings did. He found it and gave it to Catherine last night after the dance. I followed her and stole it from where she hid it."

"What is it?" Trig Fraker asked, but knowledge was in his voice.

"The evidence that will prove Cutler got this land crookedly," Pat said simply.

Dave Cutler swung around. "Give it here, Pat," he said harshly.

"No!!"

There was no sound. For a moment the scene held. Then fear came to Cutler, wiping away the surprise. It came, and with it was viciousness and the urge to kill. His gun came up and about, and he squeezed the trigger.

BUT Fred Vance was going in, and his lashing hand caught the gun barrel and swung it about. It roared twice more, blasting echoes. Someone cried out in agony, and then he and Cutler were fighting on the porch floor, battling for possession of the gun.

Vance felt slackness coming to Cutler's wrist, and he tugged mightily, striving to tear the weapon free. He could smell the man and see the madness in his eyes. He battered with his free hand, pumping short, hurting blows, and he was conscious that Trig Fraker was hovering close trying to get in a telling blow.

Then the gun came free, but as it did, it roared again. Fire flamed in Vance's head, burst and spread in crimson glory. He heard the faint echo of the shot, then he was sinking, dropping into nothingness.

He heard the soft cry of a girl beside him, and cool hands touched his face. He coughed and tried to push himself erect. Then there was no earth, but only a blankness through which he was spinning at a pace beyond calculation.

It was mid-morning, and two men sat their horses before the adobe house which had belonged to a herder years before. Trig Fraker was one, and he sat with one heavy leg over the horn, filling his pipe with blunt fingers.

"Then you're going," he said quietly.

"I'm going," Fred Vance answered.

A tight bandage was about his head, for Cutler's slug had torn his scalp. The blow had been heavy, but bone had not broken. He could still ride.

"But it's stupid," Trig Fraker argued. "That book of evidence will put everything back in your name again. Everything will be as it once was."

Fred Vance laughed briefly, wryness in his smile. "Not quite," he said. "Not quite."

Fraker nodded. "But what do you plan to do?"

Vance lifted a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket. "I'm hitting for the Northwest," he said. "There's new land there, and I can get a fresh start." He extended the paper. "This is power of attorney," he finished. "I want you to act for me. When things are settled, sell the land and send what money you get along to me."

Fraker took the paper. "I'm sorry," he said. "I guess you know that. I watched you and Catherine grow up."

"She was confused," Vance said harshly.

"Maybe," Fraker admitted. "The Doc tried to save her, but Cutler's wild shots caught her almost in the heart."

"Let's not talk about it," Vance said.

Fraker lit his cigarette. "I have to," he said. "You couldn't be there when she died, and she told me the whole story. You should know it, if only to stop any doubts you might possibly develop later."

"No!"

"She didn't love you," Trig Fraker said. "That's why she quit writing. Then when she found you were to be paroled, she lied to you about the letters, and wrote fake ones. She thought you'd fight to regain your land, and she meant to marry you. When she found out you wouldn't fight, she planned to frame you for my death, figuring on getting rid of both of us at the same time. With you hanged, and the land returned, she and Clare would own everything. She killed Jennings because he backed out of killing me at the last minute. She was afraid he would talk and ruin everything."

"That's enough," Fred Vance said, and reined his horse away. He looked back. "I'll write and send my address," he finished. "Luck to you, Trig."

"Luck, Fred," Fraker answered, and watched him ride away.

Fred Vance kicked the horse into a lope, wanting to get away from this land as swiftly as possible. He sent the horse over the rise, not looking back. Memories were here, some good, some bad, but it was best they all be forgotten.

HE SLOWED his horse after a time, for the jarring of the hoofs echoed in his head. He rode more slowly, rolling a cigarette. A rider drifted out of the cover of a clump of trees, and he reined in, waiting, a pulse suddenly pounding in his throat.

"I thought you'd ride this way," Pat Severn said evenly.

He stared, and the excitement built in him. Her eyes were a lighter blue today, and the riding clothes clung to her slim body. His conscience twinged, and he thought of Catherine. It was then that he knew he had not loved her as a man should love a woman. She had been a tie with his past, and so he had clung to her as the only stable thing in a nightmare world.

Pat was watching, and he flushed, wondering if she knew his thoughts.

"I'm riding on," he said finally.

"Quitting?" she asked.

"If you want to call it that."

He lit the cigarette, and mentally cursed the sudden shaking of his fingers.

"I wanted to explain something to you," the girl said.

"It isn't necessary."

"But it is." She faced him honestly, and he saw the faint sheen of single tears in her eyes. "I stayed with Dave Cutler because I wanted to find that book of evidence. My mother left him because he got drunk and bragged of his crookedness. Her horse fell and killed her. Before she died she told me what she had discovered."

Fred wanted to knee his horse ahead, but made no move. It was as though he must have this girl's permission.

"And I had Jennings fight you, just as he

[*Turn page*]

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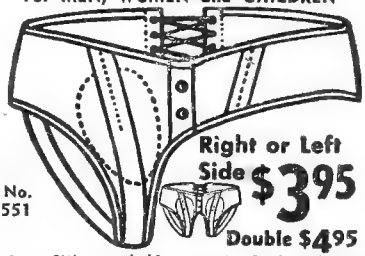

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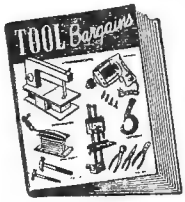

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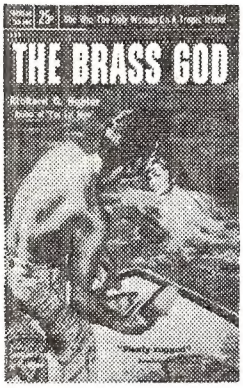

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said," Pat went on steadily. "It wasn't right, but I wanted to make you angry enough to stay and fight—or else scared enough to run away. I had to know what kind of man you were."

He kneed his horse ahead until they were side by side. Puzzlement was in him, but another feeling was growing. "Why did you want to know?" he asked.

She looked away, and he caught her shoulder and turned her about.

"Why?" he demanded.

She looked squarely at him. "Why did you believe in me last night?" she asked. "No one else did."

Fred Vance drew a deep breath. "Pat," he said, "listen to me. I'm going away, going to the Northwest. I'm figuring on settling there. I'll write, if you want me to, and maybe later—"

"Yes, Fred?"

He licked his lips. "Pat," he said, "last night, when I said I believed in you, it was because I suddenly knew I loved you." He stopped her words. "I know this isn't the time or the place to say that, but it's the truth. I don't know how you feel, nor if you could ever learn to love me. But I'll write, and maybe you'll know by then if I might be the man for you."

She was crying, and he soothed her clumsily. The horses stood, and he drew her close, and the excitement was building in him.

"Will you kiss me good-by?" he asked.

She kissed him then, and it was as he had remembered. This was fulfillment and promise and all that he desired.

"You will write?" he asked.

"No!" Pat said clearly, and pulled away. Then she was riding toward the clump of trees.

"Pat!" Fred Vance cried, and suddenly panic was in his mind.

But she was gone, riding into the trees. He stared blankly, cigarette forgotten, and there was a heavy sickness in him. The line of his shoulders slumped, and he understood fully then all that he had lost in this valley.

"Hup!" he said to the black, and the horse walked slowly ahead.

He heard the girl call out his name, and he spun the horse so fast it almost threw

him. His eyes went wide in surprise, then he was laughing and riding back, and she was waiting outside the clump of trees.

"Well?" she asked.

VANCE stared at her, then his gaze swung to the pack-horse she was leading from the trees. It was packed, waiting for a long trip.

"But—" he began.

"I've loved you, Fred, for so long I can't remember when it started. Maybe that's why this was the time and place to tell me of the way you felt."

"But the pack-horse—"

She smiled through her tears, gamin, woman and sweetheart—everything he could demand.

"I'm a hussy," she said. "And so I came prepared."

He laughed aloud, and then he bent and kissed her and held her close for a moment. She returned his laugh and his kiss, and her eyes watched his face tenderly.

"Is the Northwest a big country?" she asked.

"Big?" he said, and suddenly he knew his life had just begun. "I'll tame it and give it to you for a pet."

They began to ride, going up and away from the valley. The trail stretched ahead, winding, but always ending at their dream. It was not a lonely trail now, nor would it ever be again. And Fred Vance, knowing that, reached out and touched Pat's slim brown hand. In their answering smiles, each found the answer to what was still to come.

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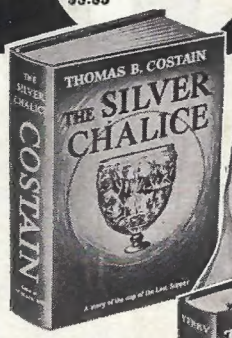

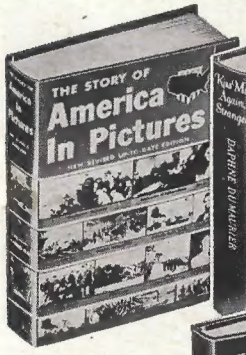

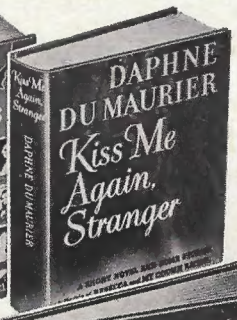

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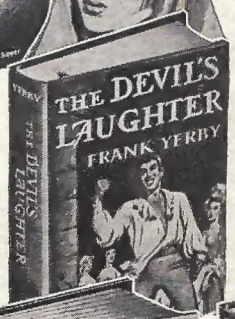

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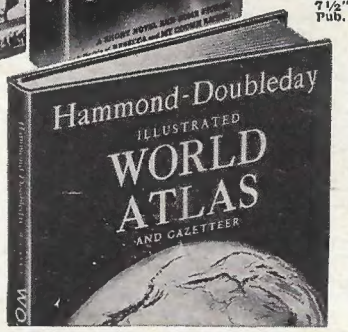

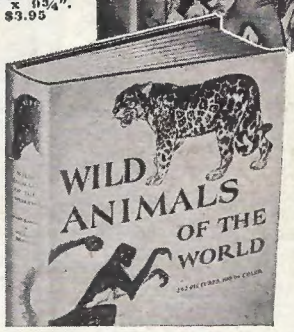

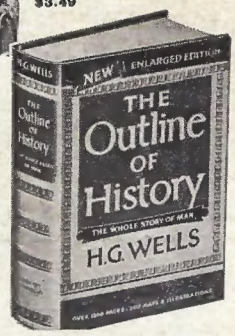

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